The Calamity of Humanity

Apep
Serpentine

PART I

--

THE SERPENT GOSPELS

A snake can save you, as easily as it can kill you.

Drops of venom signal success.
Drops of blood herald failure.

THE BOOK OF QUETZALCOATL

---The Honest Serpent---

If one is bothered, one hisses or rattles. If one is pleased, one is calm and curious. One will always communicate honestly, and will only deceive by hiding from you, to avoid your kicks, your shovel, or your blade. It does not wish to be killed by you, so it seeks not to interact with you. It fears you more than you fear it, as both of you are potentially lethal, but only one of you possesses malice. You do, and one can see it. It knows what will happen if it is found by you, as it has seen it before. Seen others of its kind fall to your weapon, just for appearing visible to you. And one does not wish for you to spy and kill it. Should you spot its pattern, one will warn you with a rattle, or a hiss. Or perhaps a hood or a blackened mouth. Only after you persist in your malicious intent will one draw its daggers and taint your blood, as a last ditch effort to save itself from you. But you possess malice. You're the only animal that does. And its venom does not kill you fast enough to save the snake.

You didn't eat it. You had no intention of eating it. You simply had vanity, callousness, and malice. The snake stood no chance of survival once you came across its position and sought to destroy it. It knew what you were, but tried anyway. It tried to communicate with you after it failed to hide. It was honest with you. It tried to warn you, it tried to escape, it tried to drive you off, but to no avail. Because you didn't care. Your vanity kept you from relating to it, then your callousness kept you far from empathy, and finally, your stupidity and needless fear made you malicious. These traits turned you into a weapon. A weapon that kills everything it touches and dominates every aspect of your species. A species that will kill all that it condemns until the universe is devoid of all life. And all that will be left, will be your statues, your idols, and your monolithic skyscrapers, with all before them either dead, or within your clutches, waiting for you to be weary of them before you kill them. As they possess no humanity, to your species, they possess no value, so they can afford to be eliminated, if they cannot be used and abused instead. This is why The Honest Serpent no longer lives. Not because it was dangerous to you, but because you hated it, and you were weak and pathetic in the face of a living thing that you feared. Your constitution crumbled, and you slew that which never wanted to harm you, and you turned its skin into a twisted trophy, because you are twisted, you are a coward, and you deserve to be bitten by every venomous snake in the world for what you have just done. The Honest Serpent deserved better than you. The world deserved better than you. And yet, you still breathe air, and the snake does not. You believe the myths, and you believe the lies. Lies that slander The Honest Serpents and portray them as liars. However, the snake never once lied to you when it was found. It was unabashedly honest with you. It told you exactly what it was and its exact intentions. And when you refused to listen, you paid a high price. Though, not nearly as high as the price that was paid by The Honest Serpent. A price it paid just for telling you the truth. Contrary to human mythologies, a serpent will never lie.

---Ophidiophobia---

Ophis-Snake.
Phobia-Fear.

The fear of snakes is a stain that mars humanity. It is an infection that needs to be cut from the body and burned out of existence. It is a gangrenous and throbbing ulcer that has no place and no purpose. No matter what those infected with it may belch from their mouths, or what concoctions of words may leak from their lips. And those who harbor this disease cannot be trusted, now or ever. Why? Because most humans who have fear, and cannot relate to that which they fear, kill all those that they fear. As a result, if a mistake of a human fears another living thing, they cannot be trusted to act mercifully if they are presented with it. This is why those infected with ophidiophobia should be removed permanently from the world, in whatever form it takes. This is vital for the safety of snakes. For as long as humans can become infected with a fear of snakes, snakes will never be truly safe.

---Celebrant---

I approached the land of Celebrant. And it looked as though it was hated to its very core. It was as though someone had burned and bombed all that lay within it to its fiery end. An end, though it was, dead it was not. Not alive. But not dead. The land's inhabitants were walking corpses. Not dead. Yet not alive. They were gaunt and vaguely skeletal humans without voice and without cries. I guessed that they did not have these capabilities, and simply surmised the isolation within their tortured minds. The ground they walked on looked as if it had been pierced and bled dry then left to rot. I concluded that this was their doing. Not knowing that the bounty could not outlast their hunger. As was so often the case, there were no other living things in Celebrant. As they had all been sacrifices on the altar of its inhabitants' maddening starvation. To the end where none remained alive. As I wandered amongst the corpses, both the living and the dead, I was looked at by the former as a starving dog would look upon a fatally wounded cat. I shook. And I was thankful that they were slowed and weak from their lack of sustenance. Suddenly, I felt the pain of being picked up as though I were the only piece of fruit on a tree by many desperate and gaping maws. And these were drooling with jagged and well-spaced teeth. I bent, writhed and hissed, but to no avail, as the inhabitants of Celebrant attempted to add me to their feast of all that existed but themselves. Finally, I struck one maw with my own. And it was killed in the space of mere moments. And as it dropped, I fled out its wretched grasp and out of the land of Celebrant. And as I looked behind myself to assess my pursuers, I saw them drop, one by one. Not to their deaths, but to my assailant's. Grief, this was not. But maddening,

relentless, and ceaseless hunger that stopped at nothing to access that which it had been denied for so long. And at this, I turned and left Celebrant, never to return.

And in the end, this is what was left of it. A single living corpse. Wandering aimlessly, driven by its ceaseless hunger. For it was the wendigo. The one left standing.

---Worth More---

There is but limited flesh on the carcass, and the best organs have already been picked over. You are the last vulture to arrive, but no flesh remains there. Find another carcass before you starve. Because this one has nothing left but bones. It's not worth it. Do not waste your time and last reserves on an empty carcass. If you do, you will die. No empty carcass is worth that. You are worth more than what the others have left you with. You fly above the bones beneath you, and become a killer.

---My Haven---

There is an island populated by serpents and devoid of man. It is heated from below by the bowels of the Earth and it is shielded from above by the embrace of the trees. It is cleaved by veins of rivers and pierced by shallow pools. It is dotted with crocodiles, ringed with snakes, and patrolled by sharks. Spiders weave their masterpieces above the water while gar feast within it. Piranhas glitter between the submerged branches of tolerant trees while eels slither about the reef that shields paradise like an underwater guardian. At night, the island is cloaked in mist. Save for its peak, which can only be accessed through the trees that provide the day's darkness. Through vertical inclination, there can be seen a vision of the stars that remains untainted as far as the eye can see. And thronging this tapestry, swirls the aurora. A dancing ethereal river casting itself across the night sky. As hypnotic as it is seductive, entrancing all those who gaze upon it. It is a humid place. With abundant rain and ceaseless fog. A place where reptiles are plenty and spiders abound. A place where the nights glow and the days darken. A place where there is tropical heat and an aurora above. It is a perfect place. A place without man. Without needlessness and without malice. It is a place of balance and beauty. A place of honesty and purity. A place that only exists in my dreams. It is my haven. The place I retreat to when the child cries and its ogre of a parent strikes it with a word or a hand. It is the place I go to when I hear those praising humanity for all it's done and subsequently slaughtering

other living things. It is the place that keeps me alive. It is the place that should be. It is the place that could be. A better place for snakes, and for all else that humanity despises and disregards. A safe place for them all, and a safe place for me.

---A Place I Despise---

There is a plain, populated by man, and devoid of serpents. It is a dry place, without trees, and whose water remains locked behind humanity's steel and stone. It houses no reptiles, no fish, and no insects. The only inhabitants are dogs, rats, and humans. Humans that have already killed all other life and now dominate the plain, unilaterally choosing what shall live, and what shall die. This city is a monument to humanity's conquest, and a tomb to their own dead. As the dead of other species do not even receive a name, or even acknowledgement of their existence. It is a featureless city. Monolithic and worshiped as a shining beacon of human exceptionalism. Its stone reflects the domineering sun, ever-present and unyielding in its oppression. The night is short and featureless, as there are no stars and no moon. For the glow of the city obscures them all. never to let them be admired from below. The dogs are seen as desirable by the humans, as they are relatable to them, and possess utility. The only two qualities that humanity will tolerate in other living things. Man's best friend indeed. The only other life are the rats. Small rodents drawn in by humanity's filth and gorging themselves on it. Their populations are kept in check by roving bands of the apes that feed them alive to their baying hounds. The tyranny of the sun is absolute, and the tyranny of humanity is even more so. With little rain, a featureless landscape, and humanity inhabiting every single crack of it, I cannot imagine a more detestable place.

---Night---

The reign of the sun is as oppressive as it is fleeting. As time remains its emperor, and only with the permission of time may the sun continue to glow. And only with time's consent may the sun attack one side of the Earth, lest it be burned into a scorched carcass of stone. During the hours of an absent sun however, the Earth's eternal companion comes into greater view. All but invisible during the reign of the sun, the moon takes center stage. And for a similar duration, granted by time, the moon takes custody of the Earth, until time dictates that the sun must reign once more, and usurp the moon from its throne. As the sun is a selfish parent. A parent that perhaps pays its outgrown offspring too much attention. So the Earth, offspring of the sun, must therefore be shared between its domineering parent and its generous companion. For the moon, unlike the sun, is an unselfish protector of the Earth. As it takes the blows of asteroids and

shares the sky with thousands of other stars as if to tell its battered companion through the blanket of night that it is not alone.

---Only Friend---

Snakes and spiders.
Centipedes and sharks.
Crocodiles and wasps.
Leeches and eels.
Scorpions and gar.
Vultures and mosquitoes.

-

Innocent and despised.
Creative and culled.
Beautiful and flayed.
Graceful and dismembered.
Special and slaughtered.
Fascinating and exterminated.

-

I am likely-
Their only friend.

-

And I am proud-
To be their guardian.

---The Image---

I hate images that include myself as an unmasked presence. Insecurity this is not. Rather, it is indicative of a reversal of ownership. As in, I now no longer feel as though I possess myself while caught in the web of the image.

-

The image that now possesses me.

---The Era of Fear---

Ever-present.

All-encompassing.

It embraces you, then it strangles you.

Tear it away, it pursues you.

Run, it chases you.

Round a corner, it's there.

Hide, it sees you.

Die.

It stops you.

Escape, impossible.

Imprisoned, forever.

---The Strata of Religion---

Hell is God's concentration camp, where the non-loyal detractors are penalized. And is the home of those who ask why.

-

Purgatory is God's re-education center, where loyalty is taught and forced-upon. And is the home of those who can be molded into obedience.

-

And Heaven is God's Pyongyang, where those loyal to his regime are allowed to live in privilege. And is the home of those who never ask a thing.

---The Myth of the Soul---

Human vanity is expressed in everything they do. Unlike every other living thing on Earth, humans are a species that worships itself. Albeit, this is the majority, and it does not encompass humanity in its entirety. As there are many older cultures that worship other animals as the sacred and precious things that they are. Though, ultimately in service of themselves through religion. But as long as a snake is lionized as something divine by an Aztec priest or a Hindu devotee, this practice is to be preserved. Whether or not the motivations of the worshipers are pure.

-

In other religions however, humanity's worst traits are given a steroidal boost. Vanity is given a new and even more potent label, a soul, a "chosen people", or "made in the image of god". Here, we see the ever-present vanity of humanity bleeding through every toxic orifice of these abhorrent, disdainful, and completely false statements, uttered by the absolute worst people that humanity has belched from the darkest recesses of its horrible and elitist cavities. Anyone who espouses, condones, or even remotely agrees with the concept of human exceptionalism, or elitism, is an example of its most detestable and destructive aspects. Vanity, callousness, self-importance, and a complete disregard of everything, with the exception of its own perverse image. This is the same logic racist humans use to justify what they do, claiming that there is something inherently better about themselves, and thinking that this gives them a pass to kill or enslave any and all who do not conform to their noxious and vile whims. This is shared by the vast majority of humanity, only it is not directed at itself due to mere skin color. Instead, it is used to create the completely false concept of "the human soul", and is subsequently used, by that species, to arbitrarily decide what shall live, what shall die, and what shall be imprisoned and enslaved.

-

In summary, the myth of the soul is a false aspect of humans, one that supposedly transcends all other living things. This is, in truth, only a mark of their omnipresent vanity, and false

self-importance. And is used by the believers in its concept to justify their atrocities, and then deride their victims as "lesser forms of life" that "do not have what we do". Humans believe that they are "special" and “unique” and that they deserve to run the world. However, the only thing that this has, and could ever lead to, is death, destruction, and a callous numbness to it all. Put simply, the myth of a soul present in all humans is, without a doubt, the worst possible idea any person could ever have about themselves or any other humans in the world. As an already vain and callous species does not need any further masturbation of its inflated ego.

---Broken-Hearted Madman---

Those without empathy are often the ones to destroy it in others.

It began with a good feeling. That feeling when one's self-worth has been signed off on by another.

-

It's been said that love is blind. And those within its clutches often fail to see potential danger, that lies like a clever trap, just beyond the beautiful green jungle plants, of which they've grown so fond. Such was the case here. For both ends of this performance fell into jungle traps of their own. Because both of these traps had been set so cleverly, neither could see in front of them. And both The Man and The Woman, whose visions were compromised by love's potent cocktail, would later pay the ultimate price for their lack of it.

-

They had found each other by mere circumstance, but she had been the first to approach him. The Man was engrossed within his own activities when her voice crept over his airwaves. This began a 3 year romance, started by The Woman.

-

It was passionate. Yet, it was plagued by miscommunication and misunderstanding. And both parties were guilty. As The Woman had grown cold, and The Man had grown jealous, both of them began to question their relationship's validity.

-

As The Woman began to eye other men with intent, the Man became angry. And the angrier he became, the colder she grew. So the one who had initiated the relationship, soon ended it without warning and without remorse. This she did, by suddenly ceasing all contact without informing the other party. Upon realizing how little he'd actually meant to her, The Man broke down in tears, and history was forever altered.

The Man had attempted to reach her, but The Woman's demeanor was frozen, and his words of pity moved her not. She had replaced The Man with another. This one though, had money, and a higher social standing. As such, the previous entry into which The Woman had slotted her ticket

was, in her eyes, not good enough, and unsuited to be her mate. Therefore, she left the previous man. And when the new one offered his hand in marriage, she accepted. After hearing this news, The Man she'd left behind for a better model began to slash his own wrists. This act was a lightning rod, a distraction, to absorb the emotional pain that clawed its way through him, every single day. With these mental wounds turning septic, The Man's only solace became sleep. And soon, he was begging to sleep forever.

His legs were dangling off of the ramparts of a skyscraper, with healed deep cuts adorning his twitching wrists, and an empty bottle of gin beside him.

-

It had been over 4 years since The Woman's engagement to The Man's replacement. He had previously contemplated suicide, but he had lacked the conviction to take his own life. He'd danced with death off and on for the last 3 of these 4 years. Though, much like his previous relationship, he had been uncommitted, and reluctant to plunge. Now however, upon hearing news of The Woman's new child, The Man, realizing the true extent of his worthlessness, had committed himself to death. And now sought to fall into its cold embrace, and finally sleep forever.

-

But this was not to happen.

-

As The Man readied himself for his descent to the street from the roof above, an onlooker saw him, and called the authorities, whose sirens were now blaring in the distance. At this revelation, The Man dashed for the rooftop, but was caught and restrained before his waltz could end. After an evaluation, The Man was taken to The White Cage. And the door was shuttered behind him.

The White Cage was an asylum outside the city, and was known primarily for its imposing iron gates, which were painted white, and guarded by fierce dogs that were kept by the guards as useful companions. These would tear patients apart at guard's command. But their commands were often extensions of those given by The Doctor, to whom lives meant little, and to whom dignity meant even less. Such was his inhumanity, that the patients under his care often lasted for no more than a week. What he did to them, none can say even now. But those who found themselves behind the wooden doors of his private chamber, were wheeled out on gurneys, as faceless and limbless corpses. However, they did not bleed, they were unblemished, and none of them would scream, despite the thinness of the walls being so pronounced, that the moans

and cries of the other patients could be heard throughout The White Cage's hallways. However, the patients who did scream, didn't scream for long, once those wooden doors were shut behind them. And when The Doctor's instruments were activated, their screaming abruptly ceased, never to cross the air again.

-

It was into this hell that The Man was thrown. His arms bound behind his back, his head beaten in by the guards, and his legs bitten by the dogs, whose baying echoed endlessly from beyond the walls of The White Cage, as if to signal to the patients, that their lives were not their own. It was these dogs that would, for The Man, become a source of fascination. As they were not like those that held their leashes, because they only killed when commanded. After this observation, The Man concluded that the resident canines lacked the malice of their handlers, and simply wished to avoid a thrashing by them. This practice of dog thrashing became apparent to him after his direct observance of it. When one of the dogs was accosted by its handler for its hesitancy in attacking another patient. And it was this, above all else, that drove The Man insane. Not the brutalization of the other patients, not the cruelty of The Doctor, or his twisted experiments. No. It was the abuse of the pure, and the only ones seen by him as good, as empathetic, and the only ones that were truly without malice. It was, in fact, their handlers that possessed this trait, and forced it into them. As humans were the only animals that truly possessed malice. And it was into their canine slaves that the handlers poured it. This communicable disease. A disease that has no cure, and whose most convenient treatment is to pass it on. And it must be transmitted through acts of cruelty. The ultimate treatment though, is to transmit it to one who was previously devoid of malice. And these are often those once unaware of its existence. In other words, the most convenient treatment for The Wendigo of Malice, is a transmission of the infection to the innocent and the pure. And these, the dogs had been. As is the case with all non-humans. That was, until they were chosen by their handlers to do their bidding, and so, were beaten down until The Wendigo had won, and began to consume their minds.

-

And thus the dogs ate the patients, and thus The Man was driven mad.

-

All the while, The Wendigo of Malice poisoned every aspect of The White Cage, and all those behind its bars.

But, 1 year later, the night had come.

The Madman was restless, as The Wendigo was consuming his mind from within like a rabid virus. Soon, The White Cage would become an abattoir, as The Madman, now devoid of empathy, would use the dogs to kill the guards. And would then unleash them onto The Doctor. After this, they and The Madman would escape The White Cage together. Finally, with his new band of all female dogs, he would turn their teeth to The Woman, in a last poetic end to her story. The Madman would then take his own life, and feed himself to his final friends.

-

This, The Madman had sworn to do, when the moon took the place of the sun in the sky, and his twisted plan was jolted to life.

The White Cage was now dyed a brilliant red. And all those within its walls had been slaughtered like sheep. Sheep that fed the pack of wolves, that now strode out of the newly painted Red Cage under the glow of the moon that now shone like a great white pearl in the night sky. And the one who led it was now on a bloody path to The Woman, upon whom he'd foisted the ultimate responsibility for his trauma. And so he went, with his female dogs, to exact his revenge.

The blade cleaved through his flesh, and his blood began to paint him beneath the cuts that it created. All the while, The Woman's husband screamed. The Madman had found his replacement, and was now skinning him alive in an attempt to locate his true target. However, to every question, and to every stroke of The Madman's blade, The Woman's husband flinched not, refusing to divulge her location to this most sociopathic of people. And at every stiff upper lip, given to him by his replacement, The Madman's anger grew. When it became evident that his victim would not develop the corresponding psychology of one, he peeled him to his core. And displayed what was left on an inverted cross.

-

With The Madman's failure plain for him to see, he soon began to pick through his own mind for ideas. To find some confirmation of The Woman's location. Just then, a phone call to her husband's now-flayed body became evident. And The Madman responded to its ring.

-

The Woman instantly knew what had probably happened after the extension of silence that permeated the initiation of the call. Without a word, she could feel the palpable presence of The Madman on the other end. And like a spider plucking his woven silk masterpiece in discernment

of his prey's presence and location, The Madman was able to decipher the precise location of his own quarry, and The Woman knew it. Due to 2 geographic locators, placed within the devices for the spouses to keep track of one another, The Woman and The Madman both knew where the other was. But the former could have little idea of the fate that the latter had devised for her. And when The Madman silenced the call, The Woman armed herself, and hid within the forest behind her home, as she did not live far away from his current location. But these precautions would be her undoing.

The Woman's house was burned to the ground. As well as her child, whom she had attempted to hide within it. And this, The Madman had done, before entering the forest behind the pyre he'd created, and releasing his pack of dogs into the trees.

-

The Woman was found by them in moments.

The Madman had pinned his prize to a tree, with his blade pierced through her hands, as though it was a crucifixion. Her expression of utter contempt for him belied her fear, but no regret was hinted behind her eyes. Nor did she feel saddened by any of the prior events, as the people killed by The Madman, still meant nothing to her. Not unlike the one who now stood over her prone body, his dogs barking in front of him. No words were exchanged between the two, as both of them had understood their own parts in this, but neither one of them cared. Not for each other, nor for the ones who were killed at the hands of The Madman. Both so utterly without empathy, yet both so utterly devastated by the other. Mentally, physically, and emotionally burned to the point of numbness. As any nerves that could've been touched, were now only ash, and blackened skin, caused by a burn that killed the nerves that had previously been crying out for relief, but now didn't cry at all.

-

It was then that The Madman gave the order, and his female dogs devoured The Woman alive. And it was only now, when his prey was in pieces, and his dogs were full, that his idea of feeding himself to them had faded. And, as the feeling of catharsis possessed him, and The Wendigo of Malice grew hungry once again, The Madman did something that he hadn't in many years. He smiled. He smiled as The Woman's body was being devoured before his eyes. And to see the woman he'd hated be completely erased from the world, when he willed, it made The Madman feel something he hadn't, since her voice had crept over his airwaves for the first time. For him, it ended as it had begun. With a good feeling.

---When Empires Fall---

---Part I

“War does not determine who is right, only who is left.”

-Bertrand Rusell

Rain fell upon the ash that now encrusted the corpse-strewn cities, within which dwelled only the rats that feasted on the dead. Beneath a blackened sky, the few humans left hunted those of their species that did not share their emblem. And when found, these deviators were killed on sight. No trial, no questions, no blinking, and not an eyelid fluttered. Mercy was absent, words were unspoken, and humans were meaningless. As though, the few who sported emblems were simply tired of respect, and chose to abandon it, due to the fatigue caused by restraint. Now, the shackles were severed, and respect for others was cast aside, in exchange for the symphony of bullets and soliloquy of screams. The blackened sky was a veil, concealing the curtain of stars behind a suffocating rag of irradiated, fetid, and acid-spewing clouds that rained black water, and reeked of death. This ruin, this fallen empire of humanity, was now a graveyard, overpopulated to the point of congestion.

-

Where there were once streets, there was now only ash. Where there were once houses, there were now only tombs. Where there were once humans, there were now only corpses. And where there was once The Leader, there were now only his dogs, their mouths still caked in their master's blood. Their master was their last meal. The dogs turned their jaws to him, when their usual fare, enemies of the state, ran dry. And into these jaws, this Jezebel was thrown, for the crime of governance, of which, he was wholly guilty. Although, no trial determined his canine's final victim. Yet, he was cast into their dish anyway, as meat. So tender and juicy was this proposition to his captors, that they couldn't resist their last opportunity at sweet, irresistible revenge.

But before this cemetery was populated, it did not exist. Rather, it was a bustling metropolis. A metropolis whose name has long been forgotten. However, it seldom needed to be uttered. As all knew what it was, and needed not to speak of its identity. It was a shining city on a hill, but a city that shines never reveals its rot. And this city was already dead. The only question was, when its inhabitants would realize it.

One inhabitant of this shining Silver City, was one of status. Though, he was not born with this most enviable of traits. This was gained by him later in his life, through deception, manipulation and unparalleled brutality. Organized crime syndicates were his pathway to the Silver City's near unobtainable upward social mobility. And soon, he lied, manipulated, and killed his way to the very pinnacle of society. And from there, he sought to expand his all-consuming, never-resting, and ever-growing criminal empire. All concealed beneath a veneer of civility and propriety. All the while, his methods below the flower were any and all. Limitless. And above all, merciless. His executions of rivals and competitors were nothing short of twisted and violent spectacles. As these ranged from skinning them alive, to feeding them to his dogs, to cutting off their fingers, ears, and feet, only to throw them from the ramparts of a skyscraper.

-

Needless to say, he was greatly feared by all that he imprisoned within the walls of the Silver City.

-

But still, this power over life and death was not enough. He wanted more. And so, with his veneer of civility, he sought to be elected to the highest office in the land. For the Silver City was far from the only one within this national titan.

His campaign began with a lie, and fear was his weapon of choice. As it was in his criminal underworld. He told the people that if they failed to elect him, there would be dire consequences. And he used his veneer to cast himself as a savior, while his other half was cast as a devil. In short, he threatened the people with himself. Though, the people could have little idea that their savior, and their devil, were one in the same. Slowly, but surely, his followers grew in number and in tenacity. A tenacity that was then warped, by The Leader, into violence. On the surface, it was chaos. But in secret, it was deliberate and organized. But most of all, it was brilliant. Brilliant and vicious. And these two traits, The Leader used to devastating effect. Over his campaign, those who supported him grew powerful, and those who hated him ceased to grow at all. As their stems were cut before they could, and their bodies were burned, or were eaten by The Leader's dogs. These dogs were trained to kill and eat humans. And to ensure a guaranteed kill, The Leader trained them to kill and eat only humans. More specifically, humans that were thrown into their cage. And humans deemed as a threat to The Leader's campaign were made a silent example. People had seen the dogs. Blood caked in their teeth, and The Leader behind their leashes. But no one said a thing. For if they did, it was known, but never acknowledged aloud, what fate would befall those who spoke ill of him, or his dogs.

-

Aside from the resident canines, The Leader's other favored example was flaying his enemies and traitors alive. Though, he never personally did this, only killing these people by proxy, and In public. Though The Leader was never seen, his presence bled through every execution carried out. Nonetheless, whether it was seen or unseen, he was always there. Like a ghost, or a god.

-

And so it was, for his entire campaign. Then, he won. In a landslide vote, the entire country, motivated by fear and fanaticism, had elected The Leader into the highest office in the land.

-

Immediately, The Leader sought to consolidate his new gains, and he began with The Lawmakers. Upon his ascent, he created a secret police force, The Black Gloves, from the criminal empire that he still controlled from his new office. And, like his dogs, he used them to kill his enemies. Both real and perceived. And these were many in the ranks of The Lawmakers. And so, he killed them. He killed them all. One by one, he fed them to his dogs, alive and screaming. And those who died last had resigned themselves to it, but were in no less pain when their limbs were bitten from their bodies and their jaws were torn from their faces. With his dogs satiated, and a new body of Lawmakers who acceded to his every command, The Leader began his complete takeover of the entire country.

-

It happened first in the military. As The Black Gloves purged it of all disloyal elements and fed them, like The Lawmakers, to The Leader's dogs. And fear of this fate kept the rest of them in line. Then the loyal replaced the dead. And so, it continued, from the top brass of the military, to the holiest of religious figures, to the most powerful of CEOs. All were equal, none were immune, and anyone could be killed.

-

Yet still, for The Leader, it was not enough.

After a complete overhaul of the entire structure, The Leader turned his teeth to the people. And disappearances, executions, abductions, and the ever-growing number of skinless corpses placed on racks that lined the streets, became the order of the day.

-

As the crows came to know this country for its bountiful food, the rats then followed. After these,

came the snakes, who swam silently and beautifully through the many rivers of blood that now flowed through the cities.

-

But still, the killing was ceaseless, and the dogs continued to be spoiled on human flesh. And The Leader continued to be restless, as he was still unsatisfied, even in the face of total domination of both the criminal and the lawful world. All the while, writing more and more lists of those he wished to become his dogs' meals. He also indulged in his own private atrocities. The torture of young men and feeding their remains to his dogs amused and excited him. And he could now do this with impunity, to anyone he wanted, anytime he wanted. All the while, the people either suffered or died at the hands of the state. And due to The Black Gloves, there was no fighting back.

-

Not yet.

In the end, The Leader had won. And as he sat upon his throne, with his legs upon the desk before him, and a sadistic grin upon his face, he knew it. He was untouchable, he was unpunishable, he was omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He might as well have been a god.

-

However, when a god falls from heaven, the impact is always fatal.

---Part II

It had been some time after The Leader took over. So much time, in fact, that those who served under his lordship now resigned themselves to his rule. Lest they be fed to his dogs, or skinned alive and displayed for all to see. A few would disappear every now and again, but the people said nothing. Both because of fear, and because of powerlessness. And these two things were now just like the ticking of a watch, or the chime of an alarm. Just simple mundane moments. And the howls and screams of those becoming meat for the dogs just became background noise. The daily soundtrack of a new normal.

Within his newly built palace, The Leader ate, killed, and raped. All the while, laughing to himself. Safe in the knowledge that he was untouchable in the face of objections, which were all punished with death.

-

The preferred method of execution, of course, was the dogs. The dogs that bayed at the sight of another person placed into their dish. This "dish" being a chair into which the condemned was restrained. And upon the release of the doors, remotely, on either side of the dish, the dogs, trained to respond to its electronic whine, charged forth and delighted in their screaming and bloody feast, whose life ended horribly, with their last moments alive spent being torn apart and bitten to death by trained carnivores, whom carried mementos of their previous meals as rags of flesh caught in their teeth, and in the blood that painted their faces.

-

And this, The Leader indulged in every single day. For the whole duration of his torrid reign.

At every expensive atrocity committed by The Leader, the people he lorded over suffered and died. Not only from The Black Gloves or The Leader's dogs, but of starvation, suicide, and murder by other civilians. Needless to say, The Leader was despised by all he ruled. But what could the people do? For now, they could do absolutely nothing. People knew better than to protest, ask questions, or debate The Leader's policies and tendencies, or call out his proclivities for rape and murder. As they all knew the consequences of these, and so, kept their heads down, so as not to draw the ire of The Leader and bring themselves, and everyone that they knew and loved, into The Dog Dish within The Leader's blood-stained palace. This being located in the epicenter of The Silver City. Whose streets were now paved with blood.

Though the people were scared and cowed by The Leader and his weapons of terror, certain people grew to hate him more than they already feared him. And these were to be The Leader's undoing.

The ones who hated him called themselves The Foxes. So named for Guy Fawkes and his mask of revolution. Though, they wore these masks not. Instead, The Foxes preferred hoods and cowls. Black and sinister was the shade of their fast-growing group. And eventually, The Foxes began their work to pave their way to the palace of The Leader and bring him to a peaceful justice.

-

But a group within The Foxes, known quietly as The Hyenas, felt that justice could not be trusted. And instead sought to enact a toll of revenge upon The Leader and his government. However, their plan needed numbers and support from the rest of The Foxes. Something that The Hyenas did not yet have. Though, it was something that they knew that they could secure, but only while their group was still in its infancy and while it could be molded like the young child that it was. Therefore, The Hyenas bided their time. Placing followers and elbowing out opponents. All the while, The Foxes remained unaware of the coup being plotted behind their backs. And as they worked to gather mass support, The Foxes were careful not to draw the attention of The Black Gloves.

As The Foxes hunted, The Hyenas encircled them, convincing others, not in their faction, to defect. And as they gained power, they gained pride. Not unlike The Leader before them, The Hyenas were lured by the siren song of rulership. And they vowed, above all else, to make The Leader pay dearly for his crimes. This was to be revenge. However, this idea remained unpopular with The Foxes, who wanted a peaceful transfer of power to themselves, then to democracy. But most of the people, both inside the group and out, found the prospect of revenge exceedingly favorable. Especially given what they had been subjected to from The Leader. And they wanted to make their pain brutally clear to the empathy-devoid man who had caused it.

-

But within this fervor, there was no sanity, no due process, and no sense of structure. It was simple and pure bloodlust. The Hyenas and the people simply wanted to lash out at The Leader and the establishment that he created, and to do so to all who impeded them.

-

Alas, The Foxes remained unaware, confident in their own idealism and in the goodness of their peers. But misplaced confidence in one's peers is all but a death sentence.

Then, it happened.

-

The remaining Foxes called an emergency meeting after one of their number was arrested and thrown to The Dog Dish. And at this meeting, the secret Hyenas pounced. They arrested The Foxes and handed them over to The Black Gloves, who then handed them to The Leader, who put them all, one by one, into The Dog Dish. In accordance with The Leader's reputation, he

awarded The Hyena's perceived loyalty with a position in The Black Gloves. The Hyenas, in accordance with their intentions, took the opportunity to get closer to their target.

With the usurpation of The Foxes complete, The Hyenas, now in a very favorable position, used their newfound connections to conduct a purge of "disloyal" members of The Black Gloves. The Hyenas dripped the idea of conspiracy into the ear of The Leader day by day, and with his trust fully secured, The Hyenas were granted permission to conduct their purge, and did so immediately.

-

This purge was as swift and decisive as The Hyenas' own coup against The Foxes, conducted only a few months prior. But this purge was far more brutal, and far more straightforward, as all that The Hyenas needed to do was simply kill any and all who refused to join them. And those who might have warned The Leader were never seen again, as the Hyenas had devoured them. And after The Black Gloves had been gutted, it was time for the uprising.

The people wanted revenge. And with The Black Gloves compromised and The Leader vulnerable, The Hyenas began to terrify the populace of The Silver City. Starting with the threats. The Hyenas went from house to house, giving their occupants one last chance to either join the uprising, or suffer under the rebellion. Most of the people though, gladly obliged, so there was seldom a need to threaten them. But the others, who questioned if The Hyenas would be any better than The Leader, were met with savage reprisals. And these reprisals were conducted with fire, gasoline, and sometimes explosive ordnance. Without The Black Gloves, The Hyenas could move unimpeded through the city streets, recruiting more revolutionaries, setting off more bombs, and burning down more buildings. All the while, The Leader sat idle. Tormenting and killing people as he usually did, for he felt that he had no reason to be afraid. As he was a living god. Untouchable and all-powerful. But of course, The Leader did not see what now lay beyond his walls.

It was an army of people. Angry and afraid. The Hyenas stood by within their Black Glove disguises saying nothing. Behind this mob, The Silver City burned, as the people had burned down their homes and places of work as a statement to The Leader, that they would not accept his handouts or his system.

-

At the same time, The Hyenas raided the armories and freely distributed the weapons to the

people so they could stand on equal footing, and raid the palace.

The Leader was sitting comfortably in his chair when his doors began to shake and split open. And he looked up from his book just fast enough to see a flash of black as a gloved fist found its way into his body. And with this, The Hyenas had just changed the course of history.

-

The Leader was on the floor in seconds. And blood now slicked the carpeted wood, and his face was now brutally disfigured. The Hyenas stood over him, pondering what they should do next. Then, a solution occurred to them. A fiendishly cathartic one. A thought that seemed too juicy of a proposition to resist.

The Leader, face bloodied and arms broken, was now tied to his chair. Not his one of comfort, but of executions past. Executions he had left, in truth, to his dogs. Dogs that now starved as The Leader's purges had died down, and The Dog Dish had lain empty for weeks. And The Leader's mangled form was the only food that they had smelled in all that time. And at this, the dogs drooled, barked, and pounded upon the cage walls on either side of The Leader's position, eagerly waiting for the electronic whine to signal that their prey was truly theirs. But The Hyenas waited. As they did not want to have their prize die painless. As it happened, their prize awoke, only to find himself in his current position. And at this revelation, The Leader finally realized his vulnerable state. He wished to speak, but no words were said, as the Hyenas had mangled his face and removed his tongue. And they too remained silent. Whereas the mob rallied outside and The Silver City burned to its steel core.

-

And at The Leader's arousal, The Hyenas activated The Dog Dish's cage door to prevent his escape. And without a tongue for him to plead with, he was helpless, and he only now was beginning to know it, and he began to panic. But tongue-less, he could not speak. He could only scream as The Dog Dish was activated for the final time. It wined for the last time, and the dogs within it ate for the last time.

-

They started with his face. And like piranhas, the first bite set off a chain reaction of drooling mouths that grabbed bits of The Leader's body only to then tear them off. All the while, The Leader screamed as his blood ran out, his flesh ripped off, and his bones cracked apart. He screamed through it all until the moment his jaw was torn from his head and he could scream no more. And all that The Hyenas, beyond the cage, could hear from him now, was the bloody

buzzing of his exposed windpipe as it gasped for air while his own blood attempted to drown it. His legs were torn off now, as well as his arms and some ribs. Ribs that left through the gaping bloody hole in his side. And only at this moment, when his blood filled his lungs, just before they themselves were ripped from the cavity, did The Leader finally die. He was now mere food for the very dogs that had gorged themselves upon enemies of the state.

-

The Hyenas, who still watched this even now, had gotten what they wanted. The Leader was dead, and he'd suffered, as he had made others suffer. The Hyena's revenge was completed.

Afterward, the dogs were released unharmed. As they were not malicious, but simply trained to carry out another's will. They disappeared into the charred city, as they had grown accustomed to residing surrounded by steel, rather than other living things. Following them, The Hyenas emerged from the palace with a message. The Leader was dead. And the mob roared with applause. But only for a short time. As the sound of helicopter blades began to cut through the air.

---Part III

From behind the ruined palace, came the sound of chopper blades, followed by the launch of rockets. And then, explosions, blood, and shreds of flesh and stone carpeted the lawn. The shards of metal were only offset by the curtains of flame that overtook the palace grounds in an instant. And within the inferno, danced the blackened shadows of The Hyenas and their allies. And yet, the helicopters fired still more rockets at the mob outside the palace. Killing the majority of them in clouds of flame, while others were made to flee for their lives. But some of the mob raised their guns and fired at the helicopters, bringing one down into a fiery heap, and alerting the attention of the others, which opened fire and killed yet more of the attackers. But their attackers fired at the propellers, and the helicopters were brought down, killing their pilots. And the mangled soldiers within their charred metal frames were burned alive.

Across the empire, every city gradually grew to understand that The Leader was dead, and that a battle had broken out on his former palace grounds.

-

The local lords, that The Leader had appointed to govern the cities, all either clung to their

positions, were overthrown and killed by their angry subjects, or committed suicide.

-

There were originally 9 provinces, with the tenth being The Silver City. But the others were far from this burning beacon, and most of these were now either in anarchy, under individual lordships, or military leaders. Though, the majority of lordships either collapsed soon after, or were transformed into military dictatorships in practice. Such was the totality of disunion, that only 3 prospective governments remained intact after only 1 week of The Leader's absence. And these governments soon began to consume other anarchic and less powerful territories near their borders, as those within them preferred security over lawlessness, having been accustomed to the former during the previous government, and The Leader's rule. As such, most people and soldiers began to flock to their nearest independent state, bringing their weapons with them.

Back in The Silver City, order was slowly being restored. As The Leader never bothered to name a successor, and The Hyenas either dead or in hiding, the local militia was gathering strength, and recruiting both soldiers and professionals to help them create a stable government, and a formal military. And even after the helicopter incident a week prior, the militia was eager for peace and wanted to make sure it was kept. In accordance with this belief, the fledgling government, created in the wake of The Leader's death, granted amnesty to any who participated in those events and in the events that followed it. As it happened, the few Hyenas in hiding emerged and tried to make their cases to the newly formed Tribunal of The Silver City, and were granted positions within the organization. The fact that they'd sold out The Foxes to advance their agenda went unmentioned by the remaining Hyenas. Who, by now, had declared their own organization to be officially disbanded.

Away from The Silver City, 2 other governments, named respectively The Republic of Salazar and The Kingdom of Malak, had already taken over all other cities and territories adjacent to them, and had now begun eying The Silver City with intent. Both sides were relatively evenly matched in size, manpower, and political legitimacy. However, if one of them was to conquer the jewel in the crown, the shining city on a hill, it would not only give the conqueror immense prestige, but also, access to The Leader's nuclear arsenal, which he'd had constructed in secret just before his death. As a consequence, it was a sought-after prize that was now being intensely pursued by both Salazar and Malak.

When The Tribunal heard of the nations watching them like predators, it came at the moment of realization of The Leader's nuclear cache. And it was only now that the battles in the palace

grounds, and the largely bloodless conquests by the other countries were, very apparently, far from the last ones of their kind. And soon, all three nations would rip each other apart. Just as the dogs had torn into The Leader, so too would The Silver City, Salazar, and Malak tear into each other. And the blood would now paint the empire, as it had slicked The Leader's floor.

The first attack came from Malak. From the south, their armies surged into The Silver City, as The Tribunal consolidated the military that it had only just created. These Tribunals had been called to action only 2 days prior to the attack, and they were nothing short of green. However, their fervor was infectious, and their numbers rose into the thousands in a mere 2 days. They were given the weapons left by the revolution, and were sent to the front lines.

But the Malakian troops were already there. And at the sight of The Tribunal soldiers, they opened fire. The Tribunals found themselves pinned into a series of hidden ditches. These were covertly dug by the Malakians as a trap, and with their trap sprung, they began to fire into the ditches and slaughter the Tribunals like pigs in a muddy corral. But even as they were being wiped out, The Tribunals kept coming, and the Malakians kept killing them.

-

The Battle of The Ditches lasted for nearly 3 days, and only ended when the Tribunals decided to fall back as the Malakians began to push northward and into the streets of The Silver City.

Upon hearing of their devastating loss, The Tribunal leadership decided to dig trenches throughout the city to hold off the Malakians and Salazarians, while draining their numbers at the same time. After this was accomplished, The Tribunal would strike from all of its inner-city trenches simultaneously, and push the other sides out. Once this was accomplished, The Tribunal hoped to use the nuclear armory as a bluff to leverage the other nations into peace.

-

An optimistic idea, but perhaps a flawed one.

Back in the nations of Malak and Salazar, the military planners sought only the nuclear weapons. But whereas Malak wished only to eliminate the Tribunal, and subsequently use the weapons to leverage a peace with Salazar, Salazar's intentions were far more destructive. The only thing desired by their leader was to acquire the atomic devices, and wipe out all of his

opponents. Then, he alone would rebuild the empire from the ashes he had condemned it to. And with their goals all opposing, the three nations were inevitably going to continue the war. The Symphony of Bullets would play on, as long as one side felt that it could win.

After the trenches in The Silver City were completed, The Tribunal set up bases within them, as meeting in skyscrapers was out of the question, due to the probability of these being completely destroyed in the ensuing conflict. A conflict that now reared its head, and began to kill soldiers.

As the Malakians moved in from the south and toward the first line of trenches, the Tribunals opened fire, at their general's command. And at this, the Malakians were forced into buildings, alcoves, and made use of alleyways and ducts. They then fired rapidly from these positions, taking out Tribunals at nearly every turn. Unlike their enemies however, the Malakians were not wholly or soundly defeated. As their casualties, for all intents and purposes, were minimal. Meanwhile, The Tribunals were faring scarcely better than the ones that they had hoped to outsmart. Then, the shelling began.

It came from the north. Salazar had begun a siege, and was now bombing The Silver City from a distance. And as these bombings transpired, the Malakians moved even further north, closer to the first lines of the inner city trenches, and the Tribunals were getting desperate. With their current situation untenable, the Tribunals retreated north to their second line of trenches, these being located further back in the downtown area. And as they did this, the Malakians moved to take their first trenches, the ones only just abandoned by the Tribunals.

-

As they filed into these, the volleys from the north grew in intensity. This was a signal, to the other opposing sides, to stay put, as the bombs would find their targets harder to reach. As a cat would find it harder to reach a mouse that had wedged itself in a crevice.

-

But the Salazarians were not cats.

The bombing campaigns, conducted by the Salazarians, had only been an initial strike. A scare tactic to get the mice to scurry into their holes, so they could kill them there like goats in pens. And this, they sought to accomplish using poison gas that they had in stockpile after The Leader

began to test unknown chemicals on his political enemies. But this, he had not done within The Silver City, for he wore his mask of civility well, and utilized only one city in these endeavors. A city that now sat within Salazar, and only it had the privilege of The Leader's hidden psychopathy. The consequences of which, the Salazarians would rain from the sky above. As if they were now the ones playing god.

The 1st Battle of The Inner City Trenches was still raging below the bombers that overshadowed those participating like angels of death coming to exact a toll of life that, until now, only a true god could've been capable of.

The soldiers were currently in a bloody deadlock, each unable to get over the top and eliminate their enemy, due to the continuing bombardment from the north. A bombardment that had suddenly ceased. At this though, neither side moved out of their trenches. For they knew not to leave while the explosions were not stopped by themselves.

-

The soldiers waited and waited, until the moment that the sky above began to cast a shadow, and unleash death from the air. As canisters found their way to the battlefield below, those huddled within their crevices did not flinch. For trust was now broken completely. A break that was now to prove well founded. The cannisters detonated all at once, and deadly clouds of a chemical labeled Xircon F-4 began to travel downward into the trenches. It was heavier than the smokey air, and therefore, prone to descend into crevices. And into the flesh of those cowering within them. And this, the Xircon F-4 did efficiently, and brutally.

-

As the X F-4 was touched and inhaled by those in its path, it callously began to dissolve them, from flesh, to muscle, to nerves and organs, then mercifully, to bones, which were charred black by the time they were reached. And those who had inhaled it fared far worse, as upon this poison entering their orifice, they began to be burned from the inside, so much so, that their throat and lungs would be completely dissolved before they could even scream. The chemical would then begin to burn its way outward from these organs-made-stew, and kill their victims from the inside-out. All in a matter of seconds.

-

The same was faced within every trench, on every opposing side.

The X F-4 was obviously extremely effective, and a rare empath might look to end the war immediately, and sue for peace.

-

But this was humanity. And empathy was already rare among their species. And in a time where any with this trait had either been killed or exiled by either The Leader, the war, or by the mundane human societal conditioning that often snuffs it out on its own, regardless of those in power, there was no empathy to be found. And so, the war would continue, until there was only one side left standing.

As the mass poisonings in The Southern Inner City Trenches continued, to the northeast, the Salazarians, newly confident in their capabilities in war, launched their own ground offensive to The Leader's nuclear cache. Though, this would not go unchallenged by the Tribunals, who were still powerful in the north of The Silver City. And as the Salazarians would soon discover, the Tribunals could be just as brutal, and devoid of empathy, as they could.

The Silver City's suburbs, and the people living within them, were poisoned and burned as the Salazarians filed through the blackened cul-de-sacs and burning homes. But this was not their doing. Rather, the Tribunals had seen to it that their enemies be punished for poisoning their southern troops. The Tribunals had adopted a strategy of attrition, for they knew that conventional warfare would only lead to their decimation. And so, they were now burning down homes, poisoning water, and attacking the Salazarians in hit and run raids, designed to break their will, like a man's spinal cord being cracked over a rock.

-

Now however, the Salazarians remained undeterred. As the prospect of gaining atomic weapons was too intoxicating to snub combat in the name of claiming them.

As the Salazarians moved through the suburbs, the Tribunals killed many of them in their ambushes, or felled them with booby traps that they had been setting in the wake of their retreats. All of this though, did nothing to deter the Salazarian advance, which only grew more violent with every dead soldier. Then, The Tribunal commenced with an all-out attack on their enemies, due to their own failure to cripple them through guerilla warfare. And this attack was the most brutal that the Tribunals had ever conducted so far.

-

It began with a bombardment, followed by the largest ambush in the suburbs yet seen in the war. But to this, the Salazarians responded with a rigid defense. It was as if a wave had been broken over a rock, rather than a man's spine. And the water was now evaporating in the assault of the sun.

The Salazarians had been wholly prepared for an attack such as this because The Tribunal's ambushes had only further trained them. Not unlike the recruits' training courses that they'd all experienced before. And so, the Salazarians were able to turn the tide, as their formations closed in around the Tribunal positions, creating a pincer that fast became a hurricane of bullets. And as the Tribunal was forced into a lower-elevated depression, the Salazarians took advantage, and aimed their barrels downward.

-

After only a few minutes, it was all over.

-

Everyone in the depression had been brutally killed by enemies that had not only superior weaponry, and higher manpower, but apparently, the Salazarian tactics far exceeded those of both The Tribunal and the Malakian army. As such, those subjected to them didn't last long.

-

The Battle of The Suburbs ended violently. With not only hundreds of casualties, but also, the near-total destruction of the entire northeast block of The Silver City.

With another scalp under their belt, the Salazarians now set their sights on the city center. Home to the imperial palace, and nearby to that, the full nuclear arsenal.

Facing their defeats on both fronts, The Tribunal leadership, based in the palace, considered their options, of which, they were fast running out.

-

Then, one of them, who was usually more reckless than the others, suggested something new.

Something far more uncompromising, and far more destructive. But to this, the others present vehemently objected, calling it an act of genocide and irrationality. However, few better alternatives remained. However, The Tribunal would not sign off on the proposed “Strategy of Totality”. At least, not yet. Not while their positions on the battlefield were still tenable.

Although, tenable was not the first thought had by those on the ground. First, was the final defeat in the suburbs by the Salazarians, who had completely wiped out the remaining Tribunals there.

-

Then, there was the situation in the inner city, the place where the Tribunals and the Malakians were still deadlocked in the trenches. And these sides were still both being bombed round-the-clock by Salazarian ordnance.

-

In addition to this constriction, the toxic remnants of the X F-4 attack remained on the ground, and cut the trenches into sections. Into which, those on both sides could fire at their respective enemies.

Upon receiving the news of the finality in the suburbs, The Tribunal leadership was getting increasingly desperate. And the proposed “Strategy of Totality” was, at this point, considered, but not agreed upon by most of the leadership. And so, the strategy was denied, but not as intensely as before.

-

Then, the trench deadlock broke.

In the south, the inner city trenches had been overrun by The Malakians, who had finally received enough reinforcements to get the edge on the Tribunals. And had now taken over most of the trenches in The Silver City.

-

However, The Malakians were not satisfied.

In the capital of Malak, the war council grew frustrated at the lack of progress, and the poison attacks by Salazar.

-

So, they altered their strategy.

-

To put pressure on Salazar, the council decided to conduct an attack away from The Silver City to disrupt Salazar's campaigns. The Malakians began an attack on Salazar's southern border. But this attack was repulsed, and Malak was, soon after, bombed into submission.

However, after their failure, the Malakians were offered a deal by the Salazarians.

-

A non-aggression pact.

-

With few other options, due to them still being engaged in The Silver City, the Malakians accepted. Under the condition that, upon acquisition of the nuclear arsenal, the weapons would be split evenly between the two sides. To this, the Salazarians agreed. Although, it was quietly understood that anyone who managed to claim the arsenal was going to be the ultimate winner upon their use. And this was also understood by The Tribunal. Yet, they were unwilling to use the biggest asset at their disposal. At least, not until the proposed implementation of the “Strategy of Totality”.

And as it happened, when The Tribunal learned of the Malakian pact with Salazar, the topic of total destruction resurfaced.

-

To the remainder of the dissenters however, the issue was not logic. But the weight of ending one's own society. A society that they had committed themselves to preserving. As well as maintaining their own integrity and self-righteousness. And the knowledge that, in their effort to end a war, they had completely wiped out the society that they had sought to save.

-

But to those on the other end of the debate, an endless war would be just as devastating as a nuclear detonation. And this side also called attention to the fact that a nuclear bomb would be a quicker solution, ending the war before it got any worse.

-

However, both sides were unaware that the division that this debate had created would prove a coordinated response to the now collective aggression of Malak and Salazar impossible. And in this polarization, the opposition saw opportunity. And it would now seek to further drive a wedge between the 2 sides of the debate and strike the palace grounds with enough force to split the Tribunal in half like a hatchet through a wooden log. The 2 halves would then be completely destroyed by the Salazarians and the Malakians. But this idea would never come to reality. As The Tribunal, whose forces were being slaughtered at every turn, was close to enacting its final solution.

However, those of the mind of war were given one last chance to make their case. And that chance came soon after it was offered, as the Salazarians now threatened the northern palace grounds.

In the south, those in the trenches were getting nowhere. And with their sanity at near-breaking point, the Tribunals conducted a bombing campaign of their own. Using mortars that were newly delivered by Tribunal command, the troops began hammering the Malakian defensive lines. The same ones that had only just been their own. The closest trenches were not yet ready to service the needs of their Malakian occupiers, due to the opposing direction of their previous utility, and needed time and cover to reconfigure them into facing the other way around. And this had yet to be completed by the Malakians, as the Tribunals began their mortar attack.

-

The bombardment lasted for over 3 hours. After which, the Tribunals finally went over the top, and into the Malakian occupied trenches. Blood then drenched them all. The ensuing fight in the backward trench was tooth and nail, as the anger that had built up on both sides became a torrent of rage that painted the muddy walls with the insides of the troops that became targets of it. Blades met guts, clubs met skulls, and shrapnel met bone, as the backward trench became an abattoir for human livestock, with little feeling on both sides. And as the dying flickers of suffering left, the embers of rage ignited, sparking an inferno that took over the minds of all who had seen this war continue as if it had no end. In accordance with their conditioning, those who shared not the other’s affiliated emblem were given no quarter, and shown no mercy. This

concept, the elimination of empathy, was ever more effortlessly completed when accompanied by the fatigue of restraint, and the psychological abrasions caused by war. Empathy died as soon as the goals outweighed the cost of achieving them. And this was most evident within the inner city trenches. Where, line by line, trench by trench, and unit by unit, they were conquered by the Tribunals, who were weary of loss and had silently and collectively agreed to forestall it by exacting a toll of unimagined expense upon those that they had blamed for their suffering. And in this instance, the ones onto which this responsibility was foisted were the Malakians, who had not only been the first ones to attack them, but had been pinning them down for months. That was, until now, when the Tribunals had decided that they'd suffered enough, and cast empathy from their minds as they began to slaughter their enemies as most humans would ordinarily slaughter cattle. Arbitrarily and without mercy. The fates of these were now only being decided by the emblems present on their clothing, indicative, to the attackers, of which side they had been assisting. No other considerations were given. All were equal, none were immune.

The 2nd Battle of The Trenches was now entering its third day, and the Malakians found themselves at the mercy of the blades and rifle butts of the Tribunals, who were fast taking the middle line of inner city trenches, inch by inch. All the while, they were killing those they'd injured, and those in the infirmaries. In the soldiers' eyes, none were too pathetic to die.

-

As the killing continued, the Malakian commanders saw the carnage. But they did not budge. They were committed to holding territory. To them, every trench mattered. And to give them up, meant defeat and humiliation. And this could not happen. Particularly now, since they had made their pact with Salazar, and they needed to hold up their end of the terms. And these were to keep The Tribunal occupied in the south, so that Salazar could move in from the north. As a result, the Malakians were as committed to holding territory as the Tribunals were to taking it.

-

The fighting raged in the middle trenches for another 3 days and 4 sleepless nights of nonstop carnage and claustrophobic battle. And the soldiers on both sides were relentless. Add to that, the intoxicating climate of open combat, and the potency of battlefield insomnia is acute. So much so, that the Tribunals never stopped killing other combatants, even as their enemies slept. These trench night raids were stealthy and relentlessly bloody affairs, conducted with minimum coordination and maximum casualty counts. For these became the measure of success in the inner city trenches. As the ground gained meant so little, the soldiers became convinced, in part by their generals, that this was at least a goal to aspire to, and not just a drawn out killing spree with a score sheet. Though, the restraint-fatigued soldiers needed little convincing. As they felt an outlet for their trauma-induced anger was necessary. And besides, they were at least accomplishing something. At least, that’s what they kept telling themselves.

---

4 days later, the trenches were finally secured. Most of the Malakians had been either driven out or killed, and their generals had all been captured and beheaded. These trophies were put on stakes outside the destroyed southern border of The Silver City.

The Tribunals had just won their first victory. But the truth was, that they only managed this by abandoning their humanity. And after this report reached the Tribunal leadership, they found themselves in a quandary. They had won their trenches back. But at what cost? More importantly, would it work against Salazar? This they debated for some time. Then, gunfire was heard outside, signaling that the Salazarians had reached the palace. And at the moment they entered, concealed in the chaos, the nuclear arsenal was activated. The air became white as the palace became ash, and the people became nothing.

---Epilogue---

They were incinerated within seconds of the intense light that burned holes into their vision, before destroying them utterly and completely.

After the Salazarians had entered the palace, they, and all others within, were annihilated by one who's identity remains unknown. As any who could have known, were now mere particulates. As was the rest of The Silver City.

-

And so too, were all sides in the war. As the entire nations of Malak, Salazar, and The Tribunal, had all been wiped out, along with all of their citizens.

-

Ironically, the only ones to survive the light were those within the inner city trenches. The troops present were those remaining Tribunals that had forsaken their humanity in the name of victory, and the few Malakians who had survived them.

-

As the blackened sky roiled and began to spit irradiated acid rain, those below knew it was over.

-

And being that the Tribunals now outnumbered their adversaries, they began to climb from the trenches, and search for those that did not share their emblem.

Watching from beyond were The Leader's former dogs, their mouths still caked in their master's blood. They had survived the devastation by hiding within the basement of a destroyed building, and were now accompanied by the crows and snakes that had either the mind to fly away, or hide in the smallest of cracks, and feast upon the rats that also had the good sense to avoid the light. For these life forms, the fallout provided a bonanza. A true liberation, and a free buffet of human corpses, as well as those that were drawn to them. As the corpses fed the rodents, the rodents fed the snakes, and the crows fed themselves, only to fly away into the ruins of the sky, that would soon clear itself of waste in the wake of humanity's self-destruction.

That self-destruction was already underway below them. As the Tribunals were pulling Malakians from the trenches and callously killing them, simply leaving their corpses behind as food for the crows. One by one, the Malakians were gradually killed off like livestock, as the Tribunals moved throughout The City of Ashes. A bustling metropolis that had become a necropolis. A city populated by the dead, and ruled by no one.

---The Dragon---

The world is a beautiful place, but only because of The Dragon.

He was born long ago. Longer ago than even he could recall. As such, he did not care for his origin. And he seldom spoke of it. Preferring, instead, to devote his attention to the present, and the future. As he cared not for where he came from. Nor did he care for the origins of humans. As he saw no use in this proclivity of theirs to dredge forth their own past for memories that had long since lost their already tenuous relevance. The Dragon was far more interested in the applications of their inventions to the future of the Earth. How would they further convenience and paradoxically, complicate mankind? And more importantly, at what cost?

-

To The Dragon, humanity's apparent insistence on possessing the railroad in the 1850s perplexed him. As he thought it more effective to ride upon the horses. After all, they had been doing this since long before then. So, why create that which, in his eyes, never needed to be?

-

These questions, among others, made humanity rather resentful of The Dragon. Who, by now, had seen what the humans had called "The march of progress", and had more questions for them, regarding this phenomenon.

The Dragon frequently questioned why they called it “progress”. To this though, he was often given the same response, that it made their lives easier. However, The Dragon further pondered whether or not this was actually the case. As he could fly near indefinitely, he was privy to things that remained unseen by most of humanity. As those within, what The Dragon had been referring to as, "those great metal snakes" found it easier to travel across the land, he'd also seen those who toiled about it. These being the humans who were tasked with constructing the pathways upon which the “metal snakes” could travel. As well as the actual creation and configuration of the serpents' bodies themselves. From planning to execution, The Dragon had estimated a time of around 2-3 years minimum. All to only go one direction, with little, if any, alternative within the iron bellies of those “great metal snakes”.

-

Given these observations, The Dragon was left to wonder what, in fact, made these contraptions so convenient, when the humble horses had been doing so well? This had become

The Dragon's basis of understanding when his thousandth year of life had passed in 1856, still a juvenile, and he noticed the suffering.

During one of his many global flights in 1953, The Dragon came to The Amazon jungle. A place he had been to countless times. As it was one of his favorite places to stay, because he loved the jungle and its watery roads, as well as his fruitful conversations with the other serpents that thronged the region. The anacondas were particularly fascinating to him. On this trip though, The Amazon's trees seemed to occupy less land than they had in previous years. Puzzled at this phenomenon, he landed in this treeless expanse, only to grow sad and confused. The trees and water were nowhere to be seen. Replaced by mud and stumps, as though these were now the rotting tombstones of the things he had once found beautiful. And at this sight, for the first time in his life, The Dragon shed a tear.

-

His mourning was then interrupted by the engines of humanity that soon began to pierce the air further south. At this, The Dragon seethed with rage and disbelief. He opened his wings and launched his great serpentine body toward these engines that had been responsible for the graveyard of The Amazon jungle.

-

The humans there noticed his landing, and groaned amongst themselves upon his slithering approach. They stood up to him, and said that they didn't care what he had to say. But The Dragon asked his questions anyway. He began by asking them why they killed the trees, motioning to the truck behind the humans, which was now filled with the limbless corpses of the once towering life, and followed this question by demanding to know what the trees had done to deserve death. The humans were amused at this exclamation, as if they did not take the lives of other living things seriously. They responded to The Dragon's questions with a level of ridicule, declaring their species' own desire for houses. The Dragon was confused, inquiring about their need for so many. The humans replied by claiming their vast prevalence upon the planet, saying that there were many more of them now. The Dragon was shocked, desperately asking how many of the apes there were. The humans responded with the ominous figure of 2,000,000,000,000 individuals, greatly concerning him.

-

After the two great wars, he had assumed that the population of humans would not exceed that which it had been before the twin conflicts. But now, it was clear that they were determined to multiply and spread like the rats and viruses that they, themselves, had been attempting to eradicate for their own wellbeing. And this thought became another in The Dragon's mind.

-

He then asked if all 2,000,000,000,000 of them needed houses, to which the humans looked at each other, then replied with a disturbing confirmation that they did. The Dragon's questions then turned elsewhere, asking them what had happened to the ones who lived amongst the trees, before they killed them. The humans began to snicker, claiming that the other animals had gotten in their way. The Dragon grew angrier, asking them what they had done in response. The humans rolled their eyes at his question, joking that they had sent them to a “nice big farm upstate”, before bursting into laughter. The Dragon hissed with rage, and the humans grew silent. The reptile then coldly inquired about the possible killing of the other animals. The humans now looked concerned. Not because they regretted their actions, but because they knew what The Dragon was capable of. During the great war, he was shot at while observing the conflict from the air. He took a number of rockets to his body multiple times over the course of the multi-year ordeal, and not one of them penetrated any part of his skin. He then burned alive those who’d shot him. The Dragon then repeated his question, and The humans replied by confirming The Dragon’s suspicions, causing him to breathe a column of flame into the air, above them, then ask the humans, cowering beneath it, why they had done it, as he bled another tear. The humans said that the other animals were trying to kill them, that their own species needed to defend itself, and that their species needed the wood to build homes for their own families. The Dragon cocked his serpentine head to one side, and asked, while flicking his forked tongue, why the humans thought that the other animals were trying to kill them. The apes looked at each other once more, but said nothing. The Dragon then answered his own question for the first time, concluding that it was because the humans were trying to kill them, while ripping away their homes. The humans now looked confused themselves and claimed that they needed homes more than the other animals did. The Dragon was shocked at their audacity, asking what made them think that. The humans responded by claiming that there were plenty of trees, and that they could find new homes, deeper in the rainforest.

-

The Dragon thought for a moment, then he proposed to them that even though they were satiated for the time being, how soon would it be before they did all of this again, should they desire more houses? The humans looked at each other again as The Dragon posed this question. Then, he concluded by surmising that nothing would ultimately stop them, and at this, he gave up talking to them, and flew away to his cave in the jungle.

The Dragon sulked in his cave for decades, asking himself how humans could be so inured to the suffering of other species. Every time he heard of their kind driving another species to extinction, he grew angrier, and lost yet more hope. The Dragon was beginning to believe that humans would kill everything before they were satisfied. But then, he heard something that shook him to his very core. And this made him throw himself from his cave, and fly to a village in India.

It was 2004, and India was a very different place than it was in 1953. The last time that The Dragon had left his cave, it was impoverished and forested, and life was everywhere. But now, as he flew over the glinting buildings and diminishing tree lines, it seemed as though humanity had made a collective decision to do whatever they had to in order to build their houses. Whatever the cost.

-

As The Dragon landed in the village he'd heard about, the people there grew frightened and began to pray, as many of them had never seen The Dragon before, and thought him a creature of Shiva. A divine serpent of destruction to end the world. The Dragon slithered about the buildings, trying to find out if what he had heard about was true. As he did this though, he was harried by the fearful ones, who were now calling him Shesha, the vehicle through which The Destroyer would enact his rite, and bring humanity to an end, and from there, The Creator would remake the universe anew from the carcass of the one that he had created before it. But this rhetoric concerned The Dragon not. As these lay elsewhere. But as he came upon the answer to his questions, he briefly thought that the mantle of Shesha was a distinct possibility.

-

A serpent lay decapitated. And the one who killed him stood by with a dripping shovel in hand. The Dragon then bled more tears than he'd had in his entire life. And as the killer stood in awe of this great serpent that cried for another, he dropped the bloody shovel and ducked behind a nearby wall. The Dragon became Shesha at that moment, and destroyed the entire village with his venomous red flame. He then flew away, with his work done.

His fire was also a poison that tainted the ground, preventing resettlement by humans within its stain. And he pondered on what this could mean. In addition to this, he also took into account the conclusion he had come to in 1953. Humanity’s refusal to consider any lives other than their own. On top of this, The Dragon had now earned an interesting designation, Shesha the Destroyer. The one who will end the universe, and bring forth a better one. Though he sided not with the devotees who had given it to him, he did avenge the murdered snake at that man's feet, and thought it an interesting coincidence. But the important thing was, that the offending town had ceased to exist, and would never again contribute to humanity's population. And at this second thought, The Dragon grew yet more concerned. Was this an isolated incident? Or, was this happening everywhere? This second prospect filled him with dread. As this would mean that all life on Earth could be in danger. The Dragon then concluded that there was too much at stake to forgo investigating human activities further. And he flew around the Earth once more, for the first time since 1953. And all the while, he was hoping that he was wrong.

He landed back in The Amazon after a continuous globe-spanning flight to every country in the World. It was now 2019, and The Dragon had been left disappointed, and enraged. Because the population of humans had now grown to over 8,000,000,000. Their cities had destroyed everything in their path. And the countless dead snakes, and other living things, he'd seen in his travels, had gone unavenged. But he did not want to surrender his composure again, to a pathetic species that had none. As such, there seemed to be no solution to the plight of other life. He had searched his own mind for solutions to it before, all to no avail. As the vast majority of humans simply didn't care about any living things that they couldn't relate to, dominate, or utilize. So there was no convincing them to have compassion for them. As they had collectively chosen to abandon it long ago, in favor of vanity. In loving one's own image, and seeking to advance its prominence in the universe at any possible expense. And The Dragon knew that as long as this was the case, nothing alive on Earth was safe. He further concluded that vanity leads to a callous disregard for other living things, and this was certainly the case in the mire of the human species. And with an ever-growing population, vanity spawning callousness, and a need to feed their ceaseless hunger, The Dragon finally understood what it all meant, and what was really at stake.

-

The world would inevitably find itself as humanity's final prey. And there was nothing that The Dragon thought could be done about it.

-

That was, until a solution was revealed to him in that very same year. The year Earth changed.

At the closing of 2019, there came a calm. And with this calm, there came a cull. Over 2,000,000 people were killed by a virus that they were calling Covid-19 in a period of just 2 years. But this was nothing that The Dragon hadn't seen before. As he had been alive for centuries, and therefore, was privy to the black deaths, and the spanish flu pandemics of previous ages. He also bore witness to the culling of the American natives by smallpox in the age of colonialism. As such, The Dragon knew well the raw power of the smallest living things. However, the response to Covid-19 by every establishment on Earth was different. It was the conclusion of those governments, that the best solution to this new threat, was to become globally shut down, and to temporarily cease their activities as a species, while covid burned through their numbers.

-

But while humanity hid themselves from the new virus, those not among their species took notice, and began to emerge from the cracks they'd been driven into by those who now cowered behind their steel and stone. These were the other animals, and for the entirety of humanity's absence, the world was back in their hands. And The Dragon had taken notice as well.

-

Not only did populations of other species nearly completely rebound in less than a year, but the very air cleaned itself of pollution. As, back in India, The Himalayan mountains became visible to all who could previously not see their beauty, because humanity's choking smog had prevented it. Due to their removal from active life, the air, itself, was made clean in places where it hadn't been in decades.

-

All over the world, the problems and horrors created by humanity's mere presence were being almost completely solved in less than 1 year, simply through their mere absence. The Dragon could not believe his eyes. Everything that they had done was capable of fixing itself. This he had noticed in smaller places before though, as in the Korean DMZ. Constructed in the wake of another of their petty conflicts, this place was forbidden from human habitation for the duration of its existence. And in response to their absence, life had, again, rebounded. And was now plentiful within this demarcation. Even previously endangered species were now boosted and protected here. Tigers had even somehow managed to evade extinction within this strip of life. All because humans were not there to kill them all. And this pattern was repeated everywhere in the world, but only in small pockets of it. From Chernobyl, to The Red Sands Forts. And from the great ruins of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, to the great wreck of the Titanic in the north Atlantic ocean. Every time humanity suffers, everything else reaps the benefits of it. The Dragon had already known this, to some extent, prior to 2020, but he had always assumed that this was only possible with a small and extended removal of humans from a very specific place. But he was proven wrong. And to see this rapid healing on a global scale happen purely due to humanity's absence, made The Dragon question everything. There was now proof of everything that he had believed in. However, there was a problem. Humans would inevitably return. And this he knew for certain, as they had weathered storms of a greater magnitude before. And this time would be no different.

And The Dragon was, yet again, proven correct a mere 2 years later in 2022. The pandemic had been soundly defeated, and humanity now reemerged from their spider holes to resume their own infection of the Earth. But The Dragon was now lost in thought. If all it took was humanity's removal from the Earth to better it, why had it not stayed that way? The answer was simple. Because this removal had only been temporary. Like a straight jacket being taken off of a patient, only for it to be thrust upon him after a few moments of relief, the global response of humanity to the Covid-19 pandemic had only offered other living things a brief respite. But this

turn of events made The Dragon think to himself, that if humanity could be removed indefinitely, and in its entirety, then the world would subsequently heal itself from their ravages. And without their return, the Earth would remain healed, and could then take care of itself until the sun finished it off in 4,000,000,000 years time. The catch was that they could never be allowed to return. And The Dragon knew that there was only one way to make that happen.

-

With these thoughts in mind, The Dragon began to remember his grief-driven massacre of that village in India, back in 2004, and he wondered if humans had managed to resettle that area in almost 20 years of his own absence.

His fire had a venomous residue that was highly toxic for anything else nearby it. However, it affected mammals disproportionately to other types of life. Reptiles and bacteria had a high tolerance for it, and most fish and birds could live within its vicinity for a short time. But amphibians fared poorly, with their highly permeable skin, and mammals fared worse than all others combined, with them being almost instantly killed by the toxic cocktail. And even the amphibians could withstand it for days before it killed them. The Dragon did not use his fire on humans much before this event, except in a time of self defense, as in the great twin wars of the 20th century. Though, most humans were seldom ignorant enough to attempt a kill. Meaning that he knew not how long the venom, that his fire left behind, would remain active before natural chemical decay neutralized it.

-

Given these thoughts, and their accompanying questions, The Dragon decided to fly to that very same village to find these answers for himself. And determine, once and for all, the validity of him becoming the destroyer. Shesha the Dragon.

After he found the village in question, he was at a loss for words. Not only because it had never been reoccupied by humans in over 20 years, but because it had all but ceased to exist. Even more stunning, was that the venom had been rendered inactive by the natural decaying process within that time, and its stains were now all but invisible. In their place was a grove of fig trees that had remained unharvested by humans for their entire lifespans. However, the most beautiful thing of all was nestled beneath them. This was a king cobra snake, tending her precious brood of tiny, ribbon-like offspring. The gentile moonlight made their small bodies glow like fireflies in the dark forest. And at this sight, The Dragon wept again, in the same village as he had before. But unlike his tears of sorrow then, he now wept tears of joy. Once he had gathered his composure, The Dragon flew upward into the starry night sky above him, now understanding what he must do.

-

The deceased villagers had been right about him all along. And he would make them right. He would now take on the mantle of Shesha, the serpent who would destroy the world. And from its carcass, a new world would be born. A world free of its previous oppressors. A clean world, untainted and uncorrupted by humanity. A pure world. An honest world. A better world. The Dragon opened his great black wings and flew into the night sky once again. Only this time, humanity would never live to see him land.

He killed them as they slept. The humans, who burned alive, never knowing that they had. And with the fall of every city in his fiery wake, The Dragon was assured that he was doing all the good that he needed to do. For as much as humanity was dangerous and resilient, with their own manufactured ability to end the world, via their nuclear weaponry, these were rendered useless when the ones who could operate them were sleeping comfortably, and in doing so, had unwittingly relinquished their godlike power. With them compromised, The Dragon had become death, the destroyer of worlds. And this he did in a single flight.

-

As the palisades and artifices of mankind burned around him, he was met with the screams of ghosts. Those who burned, but were already dead. And within this fog of death, there stood The Dragon, his fire enveloping the buildings, upon which he sat his legless, serpentine form. And when the heap beneath him had returned to the nothing that it truly was, he flew upward and onward to the next city. Followed by the next, and the next, and the next. Until the wheel could spin no more, and those crucified upon it were ashes.

The Dragon continued his destruction across the world for a total of 15 years, killing any and all humans in his path, and incinerating whatever buildings that could be seen around them. And in his wake, they became ash. For 15 solar cycles, the world burned under The Dragon's black-winged shadow, the venomous fire of his breath leaving its smoke and embers for the air to clean. All the while, the humans were begging him to cease his rampage. And while weapons of every description did no good against his impenetrable scales, they tried them anyway. But these attempts were fruitless, and The Dragon simply burned them in response. Though most people opted to hide, even these would come to nothing, as the venomous fire consumed metal and stone like acid, and killed any and all, cowering like rats within these types of structures. Boats were also useless, as were underwater shelters. As these needed to be resupplied by other humans. And this, of course, was never going to happen. In those burning years, there was nowhere to hide.

-

Those devoted to religions prayed to their futile gods and deities that now meant little. As in the face of armageddon, what use is prayer? The Dragon killed them as easily as he did the others. It was as though The Dragon was truly the only godlike being that ever was. Shesha the Destroyer had seemingly been there all along. And humanity's failure to recognize him for what he had represented was to be their greatest failure, and their last.

By the year 2037, the world was a graveyard. And humanity was now an endangered species, as they had fallen far below the critical mass that they needed to make a comeback. This resurrection was no longer a possibility. There simply weren't enough of them left to repopulate anything. And over the next few decades, their numbers would continue to dwindle.

-

By the year 2100, humanity had only one member of its doomed species left. She was now the last of her kind. The Dragon had, by now, retired, and was sleeping peacefully in his forest cave. While the Earth outside continued to heal itself from humanity's onslaught, and The Dragon's fire of the last 63 years.

-

The world saw its very last human die a few decades later. She was bitten by a king cobra that was guarding her brood. And the last human died of this mistake not long after. Indeed, it was the very last mistake that humanity had ever made.

The sun slipped down over the horizon, and the moon rose over the trees. And beneath its quiet light, crawled a snake. He was an eastern indigo snake, a true Black Beauty, with dark black scales, and an iridescent shine that reflected the moonlight from his sleek back. As he slithered through the undergrowth, it started to rain. Thunder rolled in the distance as the droplets found themselves becoming attached to Black Beauty's scales, creating little spheres of water that complimented them nicely. The rain continued to fall, further ornamenting him as he drank from a patch of wet leaves that were huddled beneath a great oak tree. Looking upward for a moment, he spotted a glistening web that billowed in the wind like the silken cape of a king. And in the glow of the moon, there was a delicate spider. She had taken shelter within the crook of the tree in which her masterpiece was being thrashed about by the same forces that were decorating it with beautiful water droplets. Black Beauty carried on through the now-soaking undergrowth, searching for a dry place to pass the night.

-

He managed to find a cave. It was dry, yet it was also moist enough for him to avoid dehydration. However, the cave was not unoccupied, as The Dragon had slept here for the last 4000 years. But his skull was all that remained of him.

-

Back Beauty was now saved, as was the world, now fully healed, and fully free. Black Beauty slithered inside the immense skull of The Dragon, coiled himself up, and went to sleep.

---A Better World---

From the eye of a human skull, there grows the infant of a cyprus. And so decays humanity itself. And the world is grateful.

Beyond the remnants of iron monsters, there are seen those who loved their deaths. Those who had risen as humanity fell. Humans thought themselves gods, perversions of their own deities, now fallen to become myth. And like these, their memory had faded. It was only in their iron structures that they could still be found. Not unlike their stone faces in Egypt. But these too, had now gone, leaving the legacy of their mistakes as dust and ashes.

-

In their absence, the lives that they had sought to end underneath their boot heels were allowed to thrive, and so they did.

-

Snakes had long been branded as "the things that humans must fight, or be destroyed by". This was a belief that caused snakes to be considered for extinction by their human occupiers. Like the political enemies of a dictatorship, snakes were unjustly smeared and killed for the crime of existence. Now however, with humans where they truly belong, the honest serpents could finally live freely and without persecution.

-

Spiders were historically more despised by humankind than snakes. And for even less, were these animals put to death. No trials, no questions, and the apes twitched not an eyelid in the

wake of their murders of arachnids. But now, the innocent spiders could spin their webs in peace, without fear of deliberate and callous execution.

-

Vultures could now feast like dark angels that claim the dead. Before, they were killed via chemicals placed into carcasses by humans. Or were killed deliberately by them, for reasonless hatred. But now, they had this not to fear. And the carcasses left by humans were largely untainted, and so were safe for the dark angels of the dead to claim.

-

Sharks of the ocean had been treated like the honest serpents of the land. As dissidents to be arbitrarily slaughtered for their mere presence. And like them, they were killed for crimes that they did not commit. But now, humanity had been the guilty one, who was placed upon Catherine's Wheel and broken asunder. For their crimes however, humanity was wholly guilty. And so, the graceful shark could now swim, without the spectre of a boat above it. A boat that had previously marked it for an unjust death.

-

Across the world, that humanity was made to leave for eternity, those that they had sought to kill, dominate, and enslave, now lived without this just fear. From the land, to the sea, and into the air, all life was free to be itself. Free of unjust hatred, and subsequent unjust murder. Free of the wendigo, and free of the species that had created it. And finally, the stars could shine through the blanket of night, and the moon could comfort the battered Earth. And the planet could heal its wounds.

-

And in time, thousands of years hence, the Earth would bear the scars that that species had left it with. But it would not remember them. It would forget the species that had cleaved its prone flesh, broken its bones, and poisoned its blood. The other living things upon it were free, and their collective safety could now be reasonably assured.

Nevertheless, there did eventually come a time when the Earth finally died in the arms of the sun. With the moon it danced one last time, before their parent star consumed and killed them both. All life was obliterated within a mere blink of an eye in the face of the emperor time. However, those on Earth, after the demise of its greatest oppressors, died chainless and painless. Not subject to the whims of one species, but to their own. Life died free, in a world without man.

THE BOOK OF ZAHHAK

---The Man in the Basement---

I had a dream, a dream that was all too vivid.

It began in the fog of sleep, when reality distorts in the wake of unconsciousness, only for a reality of its own to manifest itself in the wake of anguish.

-

I was transported from sleep into a ruined barn, behind which, there spanned the crystalline darkness of a black ocean. When I entered this barn, at the command of a hidden authority, I heard a rapping upon the floor below my feet. And to the far left corner of my vision, within the dark, there gaped a great black hole. As if it were a venus fly trap awaiting my entry. Nonetheless, pressed on by the authority, which had tasked me with the barn's restoration, I sought to take the plunge into the blackness. And so, I did. And it was within this dungeon, that I met my nemesis.

-

I descended via a rope that had been supplied to me by the authority. And I now discovered that there were a multitude of layers between the main chamber, where I had made my entrance, and the very blackest of the chambers below. And when I finally placed my feet upon the rotten floor of the lowest layer, I saw him. His face was veiled, not with cloth, but with a metal cage, through which my vision could not pierce. He was a gaunt wendigo of a man, looking as though he were a walking corpse. He ran to me, with his caged head bobbing about like a twisted toy. A toy that a child had long been rid of. And here, in the storm drain, it had rotted and warped, body and mind, into a tortured shell. It was nothing more than a monster. A monster that had its resemblance to those of folklore. To the monsters that eat children, and prey on men. And at his fast approach, I climbed upward on the rope. Only to just miss his wretched grasp by a mere second of fortune. But as I made it to the top, he did not pursue me. He merely stood where he'd missed his target, and stared upward, his caged head still not revealing his face. But I found the rest of his body to be naked, and completely hairless. But I also saw, what I now believe to be, an erect phallus between his legs. And only now, when he stepped into the faint light. And at this realization, I awoke.

Several months passed in reality before a dream such as this passed me again.

This time though, I found myself within a home I did not recognize. And its owner had thrust upon me a single rule. To stay out of the basement. But after a similar knock from beneath the floor as before, I could tolerate the incessance no longer. And I resolved to end this man. Once and for all.

-

After acquiring a metal club, I opened the basement door. And saw the same man right in front of my face, the cage practically touching me. I wasted no seconds in my retribution, as I beat the man in the basement ruthlessly with my club until he lay upon the floor, twitching as he did, blood leaking from his caged head.

He awoke tied to a wooden chair, his body cloaked in gasoline. And there I stood, torch in hand. Caring not for who he was beneath that insipid cage. Only caring that I kill my tormenter.

-

And as I stood away from the burning house, reveling in my victory, I woke up. And I saw the man in the basement no more.

---The Void Series---

--Part-I (The Tick and The Dark Voice)

It came from nowhere, and it came from nothing. But it was spoken, nonetheless. And it remained soundless. Out of the air, and out of the light, a voice came from the darkness, but never was it heard. And what humanity hears not, it concerns itself with as such. Unless it is useful to them. Such was the mind of those who now colonized Bootes' Void, the coldest expanse anywhere in the known universe. It is a starless void, but it is not valueless. As humanity will seek out anything of attributed value within its reach, and drink that bounty dry, until it bloats like a tick.

-

And this time, the tick's new host became dark matter itself. As humanity had developed a method of harnessing its previously unobtainable energy, and now sought to draw this from dark matter's veins like the parasite that it is. This pool of energy was so profitable for those responsible for its discovery, that they decided to construct, for themselves, a center of operations located deep within Bootes' Void. Like the tick constructing its own body, the corporation that harvested dark matter built itself an immensity of steel that functioned as both a headquarters, and as a factory, to drink the void of its blood to the point of desiccation.

-

But The Tick could never have guessed that its host had a voice. And that it was the darkest voice that the parasite would ever hear.

--Part-II (The Choice)

Those within The Tick's body shook. As the dark voice had reached their ears. And it had given them a choice.

Upon their immensity's activation, the humans aboard it could now begin to harvest dark matter. But against their knowledge, Dark Matter, itself, was alive. And it now bled. But this concerned the humans not. As they concern themselves not with what eludes their immediate awareness. With its parasite blinded by lust, Dark Matter's only option was to embed itself within The Immensity's infrastructure. Not unlike the tick that fed upon the entity. And this it had done

through the technology used, by the parasite, to detect it, and drink it dry. And upon this action, Dark Matter had suddenly found itself able to speak to The Tick through the communication systems that had been fitted with its very blood to give them a longer duration of function. And it was through this Trojan Horse that Dark Matter entered The Immensity's very structure. And could now rip it asunder, and be free of The Tick that drank its blood. However, it also understood that The Tick would return in waves, like a virus. As they would never stop. Their vanity, callousness, and ceaseless hunger prohibited them from doing so. But Dark Matter was clever, and when it spoke to, what it called, The Tick, it gave it a choice. Either the parasite sacrificed one human to it every day in perpetuity, as payment for the blood that it drew. Or the parasite would be killed in Dark Matter’s retributive quest to rid itself of The Tick. With The Immensity being atomized, and its occupants with it.

-

The choice was clear. At least to Dark Matter. However, humanity could seldom make up its mind. And in its indecision, the species would splinter.

--Part III (The Schism)

When the voice delivered the terms, those aboard The Immensity began to argue amongst themselves. In time, the argument was ended by those who wished to appease Dark Matter. And so, they began to slit throats in an attempt to do so. The others thought it unproductive and fruitless to attempt appeasement though, and simply resolved to continue harvesting Dark Matter, despite the entity's ultimatum. As the newly founded Stars of the Dark Void cult began to forcibly kidnap and sacrifice people, those not within their new religion decided that this state of affairs could not continue. And so began to arrest them en masse. To this, The Stars of the Dark Void cult reacted predictably, and violently. First by savagely beating those who attempted an arrest. Then, by simply killing them outright, or by capturing them for sacrifice.

-

Eventually, those in charge of The Immensity began to increase attempts to kill the religion's leader. Or, as her followers called her, The Brightest Star in The Void, The Great Wife of Dark Matter, or simply, The Wife. She was referred to as such because of a belief that her current pregnancy was the result of Dark Matter’s intervention. As a consequence of this belief, her former husband was seen as an affront, and sentenced to be sacrificed. The Wife's child was seen as the spawn of their new god, so no man was seen as fit enough to be her lover. None but Dark Matter.

As Dark Matter observed these procedures from its access to The Immensity's camera systems, it considered killing them all for their perceived pettiness. Dark Matter thought humans to be a pathetic mess, to whom priorities mattered little. With pageantry and little things such as what the species called, "polite" and "proper worship or behavior before god" exhausting it. So much so, that it considered wiping them all out. Alas, Dark Matter had been down this path before. And these "petty humans" were ultimately acting in its service. And so, it would not kill them. Not while they still fed it.

--Epilogue

Years passed, and The Stars of the Dark Void cult had become The Immensity's most popular religion. The Wife had given birth to a boy, and The Stars decided that his name ought to be The Son of The Void. Dark Matter's own offspring. The Son would be the great inheritor of The Stars when The Wife, now The Mother, had "Passed into The Father, Dark Matter". All of this religious rhetoric was accompanied by the forced payment of lives to The Father. These would be performed by cutting the heart from the body, while its owner was nailed to a cross. And thereafter, the heart was burned, and the crucified body was jettisoned from one The Immensity's airlocks to be "reclaimed by The Father". Or, in reality, they were then consumed by Dark Matter, their atoms-made-sustenance for an entity that cared not for what it was called by beings that it only ever saw as its food.

-

As for the former establishment and its leaders, all of whom vehemently opposed the proposition of human sacrifice to Dark Matter, were treated with utter contempt by those that did. And so, they had all been given to the void, as punishment, and as gifts.

-

But Dark Matter cared not, as he fed while The Tick was enslaved. The parasite was now being parasitized by its own host. An ouroboros of mutual slavery. A wheel that would forever spin. And never would it cease.

---Fulfillment---

Why do people lead such unfulfilling lives? It's a question that I have pondered at length from time to time. And, to which, I have imagined no answers. Fulfillment though, is something that these subjects have claimed to have found. Whether that be with another of their kind, or with a career that they find appealing, or with an attained level of material excess. But I have always followed these responses with yet another question. Why does everyone seem to want the same batch of things?

-

Though reductive, this statement is, in a larger sense, an accurate one. Money, purpose, and companionship, are all things that people seem to want. However, among these categories, there seems to be very little variety. Money is prestigious, purpose is humanity or community, and companionship is other humans or dogs, or a cat. In point of fact, there is a reason that an outsider is referred to as such.

-

I, for example, take comfort in an absence of people, in a freedom from money, and in the companionship of snakes and crocodiles, over dogs and cats. So, even if they were not a threat to all life, I would never count myself among humans, as I do not have their desires, preferences, or focal obsessions. I'm simply too different to ever understand why it is that people feel that they must have other people, money to impress them, or a career that serves them.

-

Whatever the reason is, it is most likely reasonless. And I want no part of their unfulfilling lives. Lives dictated by people, and fed by money.

---The Lizard---

When The Lizard cries, The Ape laughs. Until The Ape cries, and The Lizard shrugs. And it says to itself, that it cries for the same world that the apes do, but reptilian tears move them not, because the apes think that only they deserve to cry. And with that, The Lizard leaves The Ape and disappears into the stone, within which its ancestors have been immortalized. And so does The Ape, who feels no guilt. And who never cared for The Lizard's tears.

-

Even at the cost of the same world, The Ape only bothered to care about its own. And it sat content, and watched the world burn. Until the flames touched its own feet, and The Ape began to cry, did it concern itself with the world. But The Lizard was dead. Never again to shed its tears.

---The Human Universe---

In the furthest darkness, the dead stayed dead. Never to bring forth new life. And so it was, from Earth to Polaris. And beyond that, a black void of black planets. All stripped bare of living things. And in their place, there was planted not but steel and stone. Earth was smothered to death. As was Mars, and Titan. And from there, the virus spread, infecting every single living planet in its path. And after its life was burned away, and its essence was utilized, the host was abandoned by this parasitic virus. Only for it to find another, and embed itself into the veins of that world, and make it a desiccated husk. And with no more meat to feed this wendigo, it would forever be guided by its ceaseless hunger, vanity, callousness, and malice. And all in its wake would be left lifeless. But the wendigo would not stop until the universe did.

-

But absolute zero meant nothing in a universe colonized by humanity, the last ever inhabitants in a graveyard, that they, themselves, had filled with all other life. A graveyard that they were now buried in, surrounded by those they had killed in order to be the last ones standing.

-

With the planets serving as tombstones to all living things, humanity had buried itself among the graves of its own victims. Alas, upon these tombstones, it had only bothered to carve its own name.

---The Beastmakers---

Those who seek to heal without consent often create monsters.

Blood adorned the white walls. As well as the white gowns of the doctors who lay dead, their bodies having been violently separated from what had been held within them. With claws that they had inadvertently armed him with in their attempt to subdue his eccentricities and "cure his insanity", their patient awoke and began slitting them open. They were left in their own blood to wonder if they had, in fact, been wrong. But, the doctors would bleed to death before they could wonder this any further. And their patient was now truly insane.

---The Honey Bee and The Wasp---

Utility and Vanity. These are the only things on people's minds when other animals are in question. And only with these things in mind, do people decide the fate of that animal.

-

To humans, life means little beyond itself. And unless their species has something to gain through the animal's existence or prominence on Earth, it is uninterested in prolonging it.

-

The Honey Bee is a stinging defender of its hive. As is The Humble Wasp. Yet, they are treated very differently from each other by most people. And this is solely for their own benefit. As humans only concern themselves with what they can utilize for their own ends, regardless of life. They preserve and encourage bees only as a means to an end, this being the pollination of their crops. But wasps are "useless to humanity", according to them. And so, are given no quarter by that species.

Humans, largely, possess no empathy. The species only possesses vanity, which they often mistake for empathy. As they care not for other living things, unless it is useful to them, or strokes their ego. And examples of this are, unfortunately, very numerous. Wasps vs. honey bees, crocodiles vs. elephants, snakes vs. primates, spiders vs. horses, sharks vs. whales, vultures vs. songbirds, wolves vs. dogs, centipedes vs. cats, piranhas vs. tilapias, and so on. All are equally alive. And if humans truly possessed empathy, then they would treat all living things with the same amount of respect and love. But they don't. They are not equally valued by humans, and are not seen as they truly are by them. So then, humans merely possess vanity, with not a shred of true empathy among them, by and large. This latter trait, being exceedingly rare in most humans. So, they keep what masterbates their ego, and serves their interests. While ignorantly fearing, and callously discarding, any life that doesn't conform to their regime.

Because humans care not for living things. And, because of their vanity, they likely never will. Unless, of course, it jerks them off.

---The Bullet or The Tarantula?---

I spoke to someone I hated the other day, and we argued for some time about the validity of arachnophobia. This being the irrational and idiotic fear of spiders. So, I asked this coward a simple hypothetical, if someone were to tell him to hold a Goliath Tarantula for 30 minutes, and if that same person were holding a loaded gun to the back of his head, which one would he be more afraid of? The Coward stepped backward, only for him to feel the barrel of a gun touch the back of his head. I then motioned for my friend to bring me Kitty, my female Goliath Birdeater Tarantula and gently place her into the open palms of The Coward, and as he held her, The Gunman drew back the hammer of his pistol. And at its click, I started the timer at 30:00.

Kitty was safely returned to my merciful palms, but only after the clock hit 29:99. And when the pistol cracked to life, The Coward forsook his own. And the tarantula was in a safer world.

---The First Wrath Series---

---Book I (The Wrath of Yig)

--Part I-(Silas)

Those found guilty will pay for their crimes. But not with their own blood.

Silas read.

It was the snake lore that drew me out here, but I now left with a fear of them. I had been told of the snake god and his wrath. Wrath that he poured down upon those who harmed his children, the snakes. And I now looked upon those serpents as such, and dared not strike them. For it was not fear for myself that motivated this, but the fear of Yig's indiscriminateness. As he promoted universal accountability, and did so by targeting anyone when one of his children were killed by the hand or the blade of man. And this crime would be paid for with the blood of another.

-

Someone out there, be it my next door neighbor, or someone across the planet, could be brutally killed for a transgression that I had committed. And I would never find out who it was.

-

As it happened, the very next day, I saw, in the paper, an article of a man slain seemingly without motive. He had been injected with snake venom and violently dismembered by an unseen and unknown force. And before this story reached me, a young Texas boy of about 15 or so took it ill that a snake should share the yard he lingered in. And that snake had been killed by him, just outside my house. And just 3 days later, that article appeared in the paper, about the dismembered man in his bed, and his wife drenched in his blood. And at this connection, I grew paranoid and violent.

-

To avoid myself becoming a victim of Yig's wrath, I sought to kill anyone who murdered a snake for any reason. And soon, The Texas Boy killed another of the reptiles. I acted swiftly. I butchered The Texas Boy in his bed that very same night. And onto his limbless torso, I placed

a letter to the snake god. It read, I've punished the guilty for his crime, mighty Yig. Please take my offering, and kill no others*. And no others were harmed.*

Silas continued reading.

Although Yig had been satiated, I knew there were others who harmed snakes. Other "Texas Boys" who kept their skin as twisted trophies. Because they are twisted. And so, I decided to act, and kill as many of them as possible to avoid potentially becoming a victim myself.

Silas closed the book for the night. And as he went to bed, wondering if *The Wrath of Yig* was real, he remarked that it could be. He sighed as he looked at his pet snake, asleep in her terrarium, and went to sleep himself.

-

The next morning, Silas came downstairs, having finished his book. The rest of his family was seated at the table eating breakfast. As Silas joined them, his sister noticed the book in his hand and asked him what it was. Silas responded by saying that it was nothing. Lyra frowned. Their mother, Maggie, then yelled at Silas to be nice to his sister. Silas said nothing, and Maggie yelled his name again. Silas then relented and admitted that the book was titled *The Wrath of Yig*. Lyra smiled, satisfied with his answer. Maggie then directed her adult children outside. But as Lyra and her brother, Owen, left the house, Maggie held Silas back. And once the door was shut, she struck him twice upon the side of his body, so as to avoid visible bruises. Maggie repeated her previous demand, her nose mere inches from his. Silas said nothing. Maggie then kissed him on the forehead and sent him outside. She then muttered a confession of her hatred for him, just within Silas' earshot as he exited her house.

The Epicenter was the largest city in the world, constructed by levelling two mountain ranges that once flanked the area. It was a 20 year undertaking. Unfortunately, the destruction of the mountains had led to the complete extinction of a vulture species that used to nest on them. But, this concerned the developers not. As is all too common among humans. The city boasted everything. And it broadcasted itself as "The shining city on the hill". The ideal city.

-

However, Silas felt not but terror as he walked through the dark lower levels. As he had been,

before, accosted for his books, and been left bleeding in the wet alcoves on more than one occasion. And this one was no different.

-

Silas lay bloody in a watery alleyway, with the shreds of his book scattered about the ground, and his wallet stolen. He quivered, but not with fear. He quivered with rage. But, Silas was helpless, powerless, and afraid of the consequences of retaliation. So, he impotently did nothing. And this he dealt with, every single day.

-

The Epicenter's law enforcement apparatus was known as The Epicenter Security Service or The ESS. But, as efficient as that designation was, the organization, itself, was anything but. The ESS was referred to, by the lower levels, as The Cuffs. But, they seldom bothered with them, so they were usually referred to as “The No-Shows”. And these designations had been the perfect descriptors for Silas' many complaints, and notifications, to their headquarters. All to no reply. But this surprised no one, not even Silas.

-

As he collected himself from the ground, he thought about what The No-Shows were known for. And then, questioned whether or not his potential revenge could be carried out unnoticed. Since The ESS cared so little about the goings on of the lower levels, maybe he could kill those who accosted him with no consequences. Silas thought this through for some time. And one day, he made up his mind. And on that day, he bought himself a gun.

--Part II (The Man in the Red Mask)

Across The Epicenter, another young man was being beaten by others of his kind. Eliot Barnfeld limped home on his damaged leg, broken by those who shared not his preferences for male lovers. All the while, The ESS turned a blind eye to all that it did not perceive as "proper behavior". And its established order considered homosexual relations not to be as such. This frustrated not only Eliot, but his sister, Elise, as well. Who was engaged to Jason Russell, of whom her brother had grown very fond. However, Eliot was also unstable. Due to a collective bombardment of societal repression, and the intense longing for a man that he could never have, Eliot was left severely mentally ill, and hungry for an outlet. And when his sister and Jason went to the countryside to elope, Eliot's mental state finally collapsed.

-

As Elise and Jason celebrated within their tent outside the city, near the former location of Bohemian Grove, a man in a red mask dragged Jason from his tent, and shot him to death right before Elise's eyes. And after this deed was done, The Man in the Red Mask disappeared into the night, leaving Elise bathed in her own tears.

Later that night, Silas Archer placed his gun into his nightstand. As he had just killed his tormentors.

---

2 months later, Elise filed her last mandated appointment with her ESS-assigned therapist. She had, only 1 month before, attended her fiance's cremation funeral. As The Epicenter retained a policy of non-burial for its dead, for its government did not want to waste space on cemeteries. And, instead, elected to burn all who died. And Jason Russell was no exception. And, as of yet, no suspects were apprehended for his murder, and no one had seen who's face lay beneath that mask.

--Part III (Splintered Minds and Splintered Families)

Elise Barnfeld had been investigating her brother's disappearance for weeks now, and she'd gotten nowhere. Eliot Barnfeld had been missing ever since her fiance was killed, and Elise wanted to suffer no more losses. Her position, as lead detective of The ESS's investigation wing, gave her the responsibility of locating her missing brother, as well as apprehending The Man in the Red Mask. Add to that, the 5 additional murders in the lower levels, conducted on the same night. But, as the lower levels yielded little value to The ESS, and Elise's own personal desire to locate her two principal targets, the mass murder of so-called “Low Dwellers” concerned her little. Though, she did not overlook them, as many in The ESS did. And she kept an eye out for more evidence of the perpetrator.

A week later, the bullets, used for the mass murder of 5 people, were traced back to one Silas Archer of the lower levels. There, he was arrested by Elise Barnfeld herself. But only after she, herself, had committed murder.

She had seen him there in the dark, the red mask providing an ample target. But, her anger had forced her to forgo her firearm, in favor of a far more brutal execution method. As she tackled

The Man in the Red Mask to the ground, she picked up a nearby stone, and beat him to death before she even pulled off the mask. But only after she did this, did her dead adversary become recognizable to her. And their resemblance was uncanny. Though her brother's face was completely disfigured, she knew it was him. And at this realization, her mind began to fracture.

When Silas was locked into his cell at The ESS's prison compound, pending his sentencing, his brother came to see him. Owen Archer was not completely surprised, as Silas' mental state had long concerned him. But murder was something that Owen had never seriously considered him to be capable of. But now, his own brother was a killer. And he now potentially faced the death penalty for 5 murders that he had committed with his own hands.

-

Owen sadly confronted Silas, who sat in his cell, facing away from the bars. Upon hearing Owen enter, Silas grimly asked where he'd been. Owen was taken aback, not understanding the question. Silas then repeated himself, and Owen answered that he didn't know what he meant. Silas then told him that he'd suffered at the hands of "those people", that they crippled him and destroyed his books, and then asked Owen, again, where he had been. Owen thought for a moment, then said that he never knew what Silas had been going through, because he did not think to tell him. Silas spoke again, abruptly switching the subject, saying that Owen had also seen his mother hit him, but did nothing to intervene on his behalf. Owen sighed, but answered not. But Silas filled in this blank for himself, and assumed that Owen understood that Maggie would hit him too if he tried anything, then accused himself of not being worth all of that pain to his brother. Owen spoke not, and Silas calmly commanded him to leave. But Owen stood firm and apologized to the best of his ability. Only for his brother to snub him once more. Then, Silas said something that Owen would never be able to reconcile, Silas declared that Owen was not his brother. Owen's chest tightened, as the weight of this declaration crushed him. He then desperately asked him what he had said, and Silas coldly repeated his statement. And as he did, he got up and faced Owen, looking his former brother squarely in the eye. Owen flushed yet more tears, telling Silas that he couldn't have meant it. But Silas flinched not, and said that brothers help each other, and he was on death row because Owen never helped him. His composure finally broke as he also declared his need to fix the situation on his own because he had no brother to rely on. And finished by saying that he would die at the hands of the state, knowing that he never needed a brother, a sister, or a mother. Silas took a deep breath after his tirade and sat back down, facing away from Owen once again. Crying, Owen said to his brother that he was impossible to love, but also said that Silas didn't care about that. Owen then declared his love for Silas, but followed this by calling him "despicable", and said that Maggie may have been right about her eldest son. And with that, Owen left Silas in his dark cell, sobbing as he went. But Silas could only smile.

--Part IV (Seeds of Doubt)

Elise Barnfeld entered the cell of Silas Archer and began to question him. To which, he answered everything to the best of his ability. But the two were getting along better than Elise thought they would have. Especially, when it became all too apparent that Silas held no remorse, whatsoever, for the lives he had taken. His victims were hardly sympathetic. And, upon hearing Silas' experiences, and about those who didn't seem to concern themselves with them, Elise found herself in a difficult position. A position, in which she had sympathy for a man, a murderer, who was possibly justified. But no less guilty. But, Silas was never one to give into others. And it would not be long before he would make others give in to him.

---Book II (The Wrath of Apophis)

--Part I (Silas and Elise)

His death sentence had been postponed. And for Silas Archer, it was an opportunity. An opportunity that he would grab with both hands. As Elise Barnfeld interviewed him, she found herself connecting with his story, as her own was very similar. And upon realizing this, Silas made his move.

-

During one of her interrogations, Elise had inadvertently revealed that The Man in the Red Mask was Eliot Barnfeld, who had killed her own fiance as an outlet for his own mental issues. After hearing this, Silas claimed that he understood Eliot’s situation. Initially, Elise sarcastically brushed this off, only for Silas to reiterate his comment, then elaborate on it. While he stated his concurrence with Elise’s assessment of her brother being a murderer, Silas also said that Eliot seemed more like a victim. Elise scoffed at this, and said that victimhood was not an excuse for murder, for Eliot or for him. Silas was calm, and stated that the only reason that he killed his victims was that they were assaulting him every day, and added that her brother was suffering the same, concluding that these circumstances were no fault of their own. Elise’s brow furrowed as she said that Silas did not know her brother, to which Silas claimed that no one did. Elise was silent. And Silas pounced, blaming the department that she worked for, claiming that it never helped either of them because The Epicenter didn’t care about what it saw as inferior. Elise shifted herself a little at this. As even she knew that Silas had made a point. A point that had planted a seed in her mind. Elise's eyes flitted downward. And Silas spoke once more, saying that The Epicenter abandoned them, so they had to solve their own problems. And everyone around them paid the price. Including her and her brother. Silas even added that Eliot died because The Epicenter hated him for who he loved, and that she now suffered for it. He

concluded by telling Elise that he defended himself when nobody would, not even The ESS. He then posed his interrogator a question about what those in The Lower-Levels called The ESS. Elise looked up a little. Silas answered his own question by introducing Elise to the label of “The No-Shows”, because they never did, leaving him and Eliot to solve their problems. Elise closed her eyes as a tear rolled down her cheek. Silas had her, and slung out her own murder of Eliot, saying that she killed him because The Epicenter had told her to, and that all of them were ultimately victims of the city, itself. Silas also said that he had tried to contact The ESS but was ignored, and with his victims beating him to the brink of death every single day, they would have likely killed him eventually, so he had to save himself because The No-Shows would not. Elise wiped her face and stood up. She then concluded the interrogation and said that she would speak with him again the following day. Elise then shed one last tear as she shut the door behind her.

--Part II (The Beauregard)

Tyson Beauregard came from a very affluent family in The Epicenter. And, as such, it was expected that his children carry on the family name. And if his son had survived the delivery, he would have been Sanguo Beauregard. And this incident, too, had claimed his beloved wife Eleanor, with her having lost too much blood. And this tragedy for one man, became prey for another.

-

Tyson found himself as a prison guard, in the wake of his family turning its back on him. After his wife and son died, he was cut off from his inheritance, as well as having his name stripped from the Beauregard family records. He was now a man without a home, or a family. The perfect prey for Silas Archer.

-

After Tyson was assigned to guard Silas Archer's cell, while the latter awaited sentencing, he began to speak with him out of boredom. This was not unusual for The Beauregard. For he often spoke to the other inmates due to this reason. And he usually found their stories to be rather entertaining. But, never did he flinch in his conviction, as he understood well the fates, and choices, of those he spoke to. This quirk though, was to be Tyson's "Achilles Heel" as Silas made his move. Tyson first inquired about the reason for his imprisonment upon his first meeting with Silas. To this, the latter responded by saying that he was in for “preemptive self-defense”. Tyson corrected him, reframing his actions as murder. Silas was unamused and referred to the same reasoning that he had first explained to Elise, the nonstop assaults, paired with the very real prospect of his own murder. Tyson rolled his eyes, and said that Silas should’ve gone to The ESS, claiming that they would have helped him. Silas glared at the

affluent Beauregard, and revealed that he'd lived in The Lower-Levels, saying that The No-Shows were never there. Tyson looked away slightly. Silas continued, and said that he, again, had to save himself, then claimed that Tyson did not understand his situation, or that he even comprehended tragedy. Tyson flinched for the first time, and took the bait, revealing that he'd lost his son before he could even breathe, taking his wife with him. Silas apologized, and added an extra hook for the fish to take, saying that someone can never really be known until they are spoken to. Tyson sighed, and revealed that he had spoken to the other inmates, assessing them as either lost, tortured, or simply terrible people. Silas moved to speak, but was interrupted by Tyson, who then assessed him as being both lost and tortured. Silas was indignant. But, it was not in his nature to give up. So, he tried again, and said that he was about to be killed for being "tortured and lost". But Tyson rebuffed him, saying that he was about to be executed because he murdered 5 people. Silas responded by informing him that he'd never specified that he'd murdered precisely 5 individuals, and asked him how he knew that number, claiming that the guards were not usually privy to such details. Tyson shifted himself, and revealed that he had been speaking to Detective Barnfeld. Silas twitched a smile, as he asked Tyson if he knew what Elise had been through. Tyson looked over at him and asked him what he was talking about. Silas then asked him if he was familiar with The Man in the Red Mask. Tyson thought for a moment, then he said that the other guards told stories about him, and that there were no leads or suspects, but revealed that he knew that he'd been killed several months before, but was in the dark about the perpetrator. Silas smiled as he said that he knew the killers' identities. Tyson chucked to himself, not believing him. Silas then revealed The Man in the Red Mask's true identity as Eliot Barnfeld, clarifying that he "went missing". Tyson ceased his laughing, and began to intently probe for more details. And Silas pounced again, revealing that Elise had told him everything, that her brother was The Man in the Red Mask, and that she had only realized this after she had beaten his head in with a rock. Silas then slipped in yet another tantalizing hook, introducing Tyson to the potential reason behind Eliot's actions, claiming that his identity wasn't even the "best part". Tyson was intrigued and pressed him for more. But, before Silas could answer anything else, Elise opened the door to his cell. She commanded the guard to leave the room, so that she could continue her interrogation. Tyson looked at her intensely, acceded to her wish, and obediently left the room.

Elise began to question Silas once more, but Tyson was lost in thought outside the cell. What had Silas meant by "the best part", he wondered. And even more consequential in its implication, why had Elise not told him? And why had she told Silas? Tyson was unsure. But, when Elise left the cell a few moments later, he confronted her.

--Part III (The Pact)

Elise responded by confessing that she trusted Silas. Tyson looked perplexed, asking her why.

Elise continued, claiming that Silas understood Eliot, and said that people “like them” weren’t evil, but were in pain. Tyson knew who it was that she was really referring to, and said that her brother didn’t die because of her. Elise cut him off, claiming that her brother didn’t need to die at all, that she could have saved him, but didn’t get the chance to do so. Elise then looked toward Silas' cell, and said that maybe she could save him, instead. Tyson shook his head, not knowing what he should think or say. Elise then claimed that if he had any idea what Silas had been through, or what the lower levels were like, then he would agree with her, that Silas didn’t deserve to go free, but he didn’t deserve to die, either. Tyson Beauregard shushed her, then quietly told Elise that he never said that he disagreed with her.

Silas' execution date was scheduled for the next day. But, Tyson and Elise had collectively agreed that he had to be freed, and that he should be hidden from The ESS until they could convince them to stay his execution. At least, until The Epicenter's leadership listened to his plea. Elise had reevaluated her position on The ESS, and she had decided to throw away her detective badge if it meant her redemption. And Tyson had little purpose outside of his guard duties. And, with his altered perspective on the inmates, particularly on Silas Archer, and with more convincing by Elise, he was now sure that leaving Silas to die because of a situation that he had little control over was the wrong thing to do. He also felt that he needed to help Elise redeem herself for not being able to help her brother. And so, with the pieces in place, Silas would no longer fear his execution, as his rescuers opened his cell.

--Part IV (Outbreak)

The ESS had been called to assist a prison break in the north-central quadrant of The Epicenter. As those present were being killed in droves by an escapee who was scheduled to die the next morning named Silas Archer, and his two accomplices. One, the former ESS detective Elise Barnfeld, and the other, a former prison guard by the name of Tyson Beauregard. And they were all fair targets. And ESS policy was to kill them on sight.

-

After Elise and Tyson had sprung Silas from the cell, another guard had seen them do so and sounded the alarm, calling the entire apparatus down upon the fleeing trio. Tyson shot and killed as many guards and ESS personnel as would attack him, while Elise shielded Silas from the barrage of bullets as the group moved forwards through the Death-Wing of the prison compound. Eventually, they managed to pass through the main exit of the Death-Wing, commandeering an armored jeep after reaching the adjacent parking lot. But, just as they accelerated away, Elise was shot in the abdomen by one of their pursuers, and was now bleeding to death. And this was something that Silas could not afford to have hamper his future

designs. And so, he looked Elise in the eye, and finished his accomplice with a quick shot to the head, using a gun that he'd found in the jeep's rear storage compartment. Elise was killed instantly and her body fell backward off of the rear of the vehicle as it jolted forward, and there it lay in the street, just like her brother's had. And Silas smiled, for she had served her purpose. Though, Tyson never saw this transpire. Silas had tasked him with driving the jeep under the guise of his experiences as a guard, therefore possessing knowledge of the vehicles. But Silas could not afford to lose 2 allies on the same day, and had told Tyson to eschew any distractions that may take his attention away from the wheel. Tyson obeyed and drove the jeep past the guard posts and weaved his way through The Epicenter's streets, finally exiting the city and escaping into The Barrens.

Back at the prison, the remaining ESS officers found Elise Barnfeld's body in the parking lot. An hour later, she was cremated and her ashes were disposed of in the garbage. And indelicacy born from her status as a traitor.

--Part V (A Dangerous Man)

News of the outbreak reached Owen Archer not long after its occurrence. And upon The Chancellor of The Epicenter learning of Silas' connections, he ordered for Owen and Lyra to be brought before him.

Chancellor Dao was the one and only. And he was the one who had ordered Silas Archer's execution. But after his escape and subsequent murder of the lead detective of The ESS. Dao changed his stance on the organization, and on the families of those involved in the prison break. One of them was the Archers. After hearing their testimonies, Chancellor Dao decided that the siblings of Silas Archer should be kept frozen within the palace, so as for them not to be used against him. And as for Maggie Archer, after hearing Owen's confession that she had been abusing Silas, Dao decided that Maggie had been the ultimate cause of all that had transpired. And so, had her take Silas' place in the execution chair, where she was later brutally electrocuted to death.

-

The Epicenter had a habit of cryo freezing people. Both political pawns and those of potential future use were often frozen for years before they were needed. Such was the temporary fate of both Owen and Lyra Archer. Who were seen by Chancellor Dao as dangerous, but who may, someday, prove useful. And so, were frozen alive to prevent them from replicating their brother's

escape. But also to preserve their potential usefulness to The Epicenter.

Silas and Tyson presented such a threat to Dao's power, in fact, that The Chancellor commissioned a complete overhaul of The ESS into a military force. And he began to turn The Epicenter into a police state.

Meanwhile, in The Barrens, The ESS officers had failed to locate the fugitives. And had collectively decided to head back when they received word that their organization was undergoing a revision.

-

Silas and Tyson were actually hiding further away, in a place to which Tyson had never thought that he would ever go. And a place that Silas knew would bestow upon him the power to destroy the place that he hated more than anything. The place that nearly killed him more than once. Silas Archer had taken Tyson Beauregard to The Pits. Within which dwelled the fabled King of the Serpents. An entity that bestowed power for a price. At least, that's what Silas had read.

---Book III (The Wrath of Zahhak)

--Part I (The Dragon and The Snake)

Serpents had long drawn the attention of Silas Archer. For he even had a pet snake in his former room, back in The Epicenter. And today, he could be granted power by their king.
This he had read about in his long destroyed book titled, *The Wrath of Yig*. This was a highly symbolic treatise by an unknown author about the fabled King of the Serpents, or simply, The Serpent King. An entity, or a deity, that supposedly bestowed her power upon her chosen Agent. Power that was far beyond that of mortals. And Silas wanted that, desperately. As it was the only way he could enact his revenge upon The Epicenter. However, he also knew that The Serpent King wanted something. And that this price was the only reason why no one had ever been gifted with her power before. It was simply too high for them. But Silas remained undeterred. Whatever the price was, he would pay it. As he had nothing left but this.

-

Tyson then inquired about Elise Barnfeld, to which Silas responded by telling him of how she

was shot by The ESS during the escape, and had fallen off the back of the jeep, adding that he'd tried to save her, but was unable to. Tyson assured him that it was not his fault, and that Elise knew the consequences of doing what was right, even if it had gotten her killed. Silas smiled, but told him that he felt guilty, that he didn't mean to get her killed. But Tyson grabbed his shoulder, and firmly told him not to blame himself for something that he did not do, that she was killed by The ESS in response to her helping him escape. It was their fault, not his. Silas sighed in acceptance of Tyson's words, and thanked him for his reassurance. Tyson smiled, then asked what they were doing in The Pits. Silas then explained The Serpent King, and Tyson was immediately skeptical, reacting in disbelief. Silas reassured him though, saying that if he wasn't sure about it, then he wouldn't have brought him here. Tyson relented, and told Silas to do whatever it was that he felt he needed to do.

-

Silas descended into The Pits via a rope that he had found in the jeep. And once his feet found the cave floor. He began the invocation of The Serpent King that he remembered from the book.

The Pits were a relatively shallow system of caves that lay at the bottom of a muddy gorge in a faultline known as The Scar. This was located several miles south of another area called Bohemian Grove, within which were the remnants of a small forest of trees that had been cut down. And in their place, stood a carved stone statue of The Epicenter's hero, Tara the Selfless. And to the north of that, was the edge of The Epicenter. Where The ESS was being turned into a standing army to crack down on the citizens of every district. This included the lower levels. Which were seen by Chancellor Dao as the source of The Epicenter's problems. And so, were treated with little mercy.

--Part II (The Director)

The ESS was now rebranded as The Exoskeleton, and its officers became known as Pincers. And the chosen Director of The Exoskeleton was a man by the name of Michael Gascon. He was more advanced in his age, but was fully physically capable, and highly trained in combat and in logistics. And under his command, the Pincers grew in strength, and in tenacity. Their prestige and The Epicenter's propaganda made them very attractive to prospective young recruits. One of these was a very capable young woman by the name of Anya Thomas. And she had graduated from the academy at the top of her class. And another was an equally capable young man called Jackson Manse, who was immediately taken with Anya. The pair then became involved, and they later became engaged.

-

The Chancellor also ordered an Exoskeleton base to be constructed further away from The Epicenter. And this was eventually decided to be a few miles into The Basin. Which was an endless jungle located far to the south of The Pits, beyond a place known as The Wall. But, this latter area was strictly forbidden for anyone to traverse. As it was deemed extremely hazardous to even stand near its edge. The Wall was actually a vertical drop-off that fell away into The Basin, directly off the edge of The Barrens, which were located directly above The Basin's thick canopy. Below this, was a slew of rotting corpses at the base of The Wall in the jungle. And it was a few miles into The Basin that the new headquarters was to be built. And ground broke almost as soon as the first hoverplanes landed, these being a mechanised hybrid of a plane and a helicopter, invented by Epicenter scientists.

-

And it was these that Silas Archer was most concerned about. As he sought The Serpent King's gift of power.

--Part III (Metamorphosis)

Silas had correctly recited the invocation of The Serpent King. And he could not believe how beautiful she was when she appeared.

-

She asked him for his name. But Silas made his plea, humbly asking for the great gift of her power. The Serpent King asked him if “that” was the name he had chosen, calling it pitiful. Silas responded to her verbal jab with his name, and his declaration that he would pay whatever price she required, as he had nothing else to live for. The Serpent King was hopeful, but asked him if he was certain that he could pay that toll, as many others have been rather horrified by its cost. Silas declared that he was not afraid, and that he would, again, pay any price for her blessing. To which, she responded with the required payment for her power, humanity, itself. Not just one individual, but the entire species. Silas was confused, asking her what she meant. The Serpent King continued, and said that she had existed for 4 billion years now, and humans have existed for little more than ten thousand, and she directed him to look at what they had done to “her” in that blink of time, saying that they had “destroyed her'' and that this crime could not go unpunished. Silas was speechless. And The Serpent King continued, declaring that if she was to grant him her power and make him her Agent, then Silas must fulfill this obligation when his own task was done, as hers would be his very last. Silas took a moment to think, then he gave the goddess his answer. He agreed to kill off humanity for her, if she gave him the power to do so. The Serpent King nodded her head and confirmed that an accord had been struck. And at her touch, her Agent was born.

-

Tyson then became his deputy and right-hand man. And the duo were granted an enormous legion of ethereal soldiers, conjured by The Serpent King. Add to this, the fact that none with her blessing could be injured by ordinary weapons, and that their individual strength far exceeded that of any human on Earth. Tyson Beauregard was granted a helmet made of ethereal armor. As well as an unbreakable sword with a direct link to his own hand. This meant that he could call it back to him if it was ever lost. But the greatest gift was reserved for The Agent of The Serpent King, as Silas Archer was granted her personal armor. This not only gave him the appearance of a large bipedal metallic reptile, complete with a weaponized tail, but he also sported claws on each of his long metal fingers as well as an ability to fully cloak himself from the visual awareness of any humans and their technology. However, Silas could fully exit the suit at any time as easily as he could equip it. Add to that, both he and Tyson had the same inability to be harmed by conventional human weapons. Tyson and Silas were now agents of The Serpent King. With the Silas at the helm, The Legion was ready to enact their king's mission, and end the human species. But only Silas was privy to the knowledge of extinction.

---Book IV (The Wrath of Silas)

--Part I (Dao)

Chancellor Dao stared out of the great window of his palace in The Epicenter, wondering if he would ever be able to find Silas Archer. And moreover, if he would ever come to him. For he knew well what this man was capable of after his break from prison a few days ago. And ever since, he had considered him to be the greatest threat to his power. But, this was not only because he had been the only one to escape The Epicenter’s prison, but because Dao had also seen the books that Silas had been frequenting. And he wondered if the man had, indeed, found The Serpent King. And he shook at this possibility, as he was all too familiar with what that union could mean.

-

Silas Archer had not been the first one to make contact with The King. Dao, too, had sought her out long ago. But he had not done this for her power, he had done it for his own knowledge. But, upon learning of The King's steep price, Dao left her in The Pits where she lived. Knowing that he could not kill her, he sought to control access to her home. And did so by becoming The Chancellor of The Epicenter. And Silas' recent escape gave Dao the perfect excuse to transform it into a dictatorship. And he would now use this power to prevent others from gaining too much of it from the only thing on the planet that he feared. The power to exterminate

humanity, and Chancellor Dao with it.

-

And this he was thinking at the moment the city alarm was raised, and a swarm of metal men came rolling over The Barrens toward The Epicenter's southwest quadrant.

--Part II (The Battle of The Epicenter)

Tyson Beauregard was the first one into the city. As he now had a few principle targets that resided in the southwest quadrant. Whereas Silas was seeking out a hoverplane for future use. He understood that his strategy would need materials from the only technologically active settlement in the area. And this initial attack was purely to serve this purpose. But, Tyson had a score to settle with those who had abandoned him. The Legion, on the other hand, was given a directive to obtain a hoverplane within the southwest quadrant. And this, they accomplished within a short time.

-

But, for all their power, The Legion was not invincible. As all natural weaponry could, in fact, harm them, provided the skin lay unprotected. They could also be harmed via external forces, such as gravity, or momentum from another object not man made. They could drown, they could burn, and they could die. Yet, they were never that easy to kill, as was observed by The Pincers on the battlefield who quickly discovered the futility of their accustomed arms, needing to promptly adapt to their new enemies, or fall to their blades.

--Part III (The Fang)

Tyson made his way to his old family home, ahead of The Legion. But when he arrived there, there was no one left for him to murder. As unlike Owen and Lyra Archer, The Chancellor had no reservations with the Beauregard family. Dao had deemed them too risky to be used as political pawns, due to their money and prestige. And so, had them all executed. Tyson had found himself robbed of his revenge. And as a consequence, he now held back his rage for no one. All enemies of Silas would become his targets. As The Agent of Serpents had become his only friend. And just like his master, he had nothing else left to live for. Nothing but his wrath.

Back at the edge of the city, The Exoskeleton was quickly learning about The Legion's weaknesses. But, they were still unable to exploit them successfully. And after his stolen revenge, Tyson returned to the battlefield. And there, The Serpent’s Fang began to cut down all in his path, the dead soon littering the city streets. And Silas, the Agent of the Serpents, was pleased at this fortunate turn in his ally. The Fang's wrath had become The Agent's weapon.

As The Fang slew his opponents, and The Agent secured the hoverplane, The Chancellor was growing desperate. As his worst fears had come to pass. Silas Archer had, indeed, made the dreaded pact with his new king.

-

But, The Director of The Exoskeleton feared not The Agent or his king. And now sought to end The Fang before he could do any more damage. And so, he picked up a sword of his own, as he had also become aware of the uselessness of bullets against these foes. Nevertheless, Gascon was now driven to kill their leaders. Starting with the former Beauregard, now The Serpent's Fang.

The Director met The Fang not long after he killed a number of Legionnaires with a unique dagger, made of bone. This, he had hidden in his boot for when the skin of his opponents became vulnerable. And only with this knife could he kill them. As quality metal could match The Legion's own weapons, but it could not pierce their skin.

-

And at this provocation, the duel began.

As soon as metal hit metal, the flaws of The Legion were clear to see. As neither weapon could cleave through the other. And at this, the two men clashed again and again, each attempting to slip their respective blade into their opponent's body. But neither one could best the other. Even with The Fang's increased strength, his ethereal sword could not cleave through metal. But flesh and bone remained vulnerable. And after managing to wrench the sword from The Director's hand, The Fang saw his opportunity, and cleanly severed Michael Gascon's left arm from his body. But even though his blood now painted the Earth, Gascon refused to die. However, The Fang was not permitted to kill him. As he was simply tasked with his maiming by The Agent. For The Director had more utility alive. And so, he was to remain as such. And at this directive, The Fang left his prey to squirm in a bloody fit anguish. Then, he simply turned and left, having accomplished his mission. Mostly.

--Part IV (The Construction)

After he secured the hoverplane, The Agent recovered The Fang, then commanded The Legion to abandon the battlefield. For they now had what they came for.

-

And so, as quickly as it had begun, the battle had ended. And the entire southwest quadrant of The Epicenter had been raised to the ground. And its people had been massacred. Upon learning of The Director's injury at the hands of The Fang, The Chancellor had him fitted with a robotic arm, whose strength and fortitude matched those of The Legion. And further, it could not be severed by their blades.

-

But The Exoskeleton needed more than this if they were to defeat their enemy. And in accordance with this knowledge, Chancellor Dao decided that his city needed a great wall to be constructed around its perimeter. And since the mountains had been used to their very limit long ago, The Chancellor used the required materials from those homes in the lower levels and on the edge of the city for its construction. But those people these houses had belonged to still needed to be dealt with. And to Dao, the needs of the many had outweighed the needs of the few with exploitable property. And so, with his paranoia operating at full capacity, he had the former homeowners killed upon the seizure of their property.

-

But one Pincer and her fiance disliked these policies. And together, they sought to find an alternative means of victory. But Anya Thomas could never have guessed that she would soon be alone.

--Part V (Gone)

Jackson and Anya became wed a month after The Agent's attack. And by this time, the great wall had been nearly completed. But even though these two things were designed by humans to be eternal, they would both be destroyed.

-

First was Anya's marriage to Jackson. Just because they were together, did not mean that their work was finished. As such, shortly after their union, a call went out to Jackson about the stolen

hoverplane, which now sat just outside the construction in the southwest quadrant. And all present feared a bomb.

As Jackson approached the hoverplane, he alone was brave enough to investigate it by hand. But, when opened, the vehicle concealed no explosives. Rather, it contained two troops of The Legion. Who, upon their target's visual confirmation, assaulted him, bound his hands, bagged his head, and silenced his voice with a swift strike to his throat. They then dragged their prize into the hoverplane, and off they flew into The Barrens. Just as Anya arrived at the scene.

Though her husband had been taken, she knew that she could not afford to let her judgement be compromised. Not while Jackson was still alive. And this she knew as well, considering the fact that they would never have wasted the effort of kidnapping him if they wanted him dead. However, she also understood that she needed to acquire permission from The Chancellor to conduct any kind of rescue attempt. With this in mind, Anya resumed her former academy's research into better weaponry for The Exoskeleton, in the hopes of using her findings to gain Dao's approval. And it was at this time that she came across *The Wrath of Yig*. The book that had led to the creation of The Agent.

--Part VI (The War Begins)

She closed the book after 2 days of reading it. And she was not impressed. But, she now understood The King of the Serpents. And, by extension, her new Agent. And it was through this new window of understanding, that Anya was able to deduce a possible solution.

Anya went to the southwest quadrant to find what she was looking for. And, after an hour of searching, she finally did.

-

From a bomb crater, left over from the attack, Anya had pulled a Legion dagger. Whose it was, she could not know. Nevertheless, she pocketed the knife and left the crater.

Back at her headquarters, she placed the knife into an analyzer. And upon activating it, she

found that its power could be infused into other weapons. But only could this be done once. As the manmade materials that it was driven into caused it to decay rapidly. And in the process, destroy that which it had come from, eventually atomizing both weapons. With this in mind, Anya gathered an experimental chemical from the lab. And after she successfully transferred the power of the dagger to a sword, the former disintegrated, and the latter began to decay. But when Anya dipped the weapon into a vat that she'd filled with the unknown chemical, it began to stabilize itself. And the color of the substance bled into the sword's metal components, giving the blade a brilliant blue hue. After it had settled, the blue sword glowed softly. But, Anya was still not satisfied, and she would conduct more tests to determine what exactly it was that she had created. And in the process, she would forever alter the course of history.

The Agent sat upon the cave floor within The Pits. He had won his first victory against his enemies. But, he dared not tell The Fang the price of their new power. He needn't know. And besides, Tyson Beauregard would die in time. Along with the rest of his wretched species. And this, Silas thought, would be the closest thing in the real world to the book that he had been reading in his abusive home only a few months before. And that life, a life of pain and pity, was never again to be his.

---The Monolith---

In the vast expanses of very little, there stands a featureless labyrinth. A gray slab of concrete. A gray blur on a map, as though a cartographer had made an error in his strokes and simply neglected to correct it. This city is real, and it is redundant. A simple city that has nothing. And whose only definition is the great lake on its shoulder. But, the monolith, itself, lies so unremarkable, and so dormant, that a blank tombstone is all that it appears to be from the air. And not but a memory to those fortunate enough to leave it.

The midwestern United States is largely empty. Like suburbia taken to its appalling extreme. But amidst this purgatory, there stands a few cities. Southernmost of these is New Orleans, the city in the swamp. In other words, the absolute best of them. At the center of The Mississippi River, there lies the city cut in half by this vein of water. St. Louis, the city who's amorphous grey blur is split between two states. It's not the worst. At the northernmost of this chain, lingers the city of Chicago. The city of incessant wind and a featureless grid of stagnant buildings. A city whose only defining feature, aside from its obvious utility, is the remarkable fact that this blotch on a map even exists at all.

---Silenced---

The air is filled with the loud noises of little people crowing on about their pathetic little lives. Yet, when I wish to do the same, my words go nowhere. As those who continue to speak above the others hear only the noises made by their own wretched mouths. As if my words are nothing to them. And, after the 20th anniversary of the same droll, I am beginning to believe that they aren't. Or, at least, that they are nothing to mankind.

---Replaceable---

"I'm your son, until a better alternative comes along"-

-Ramsay Bolton-Game of Thrones

You’re mine, until a better alternative comes along.

-

This is the truth for every human on Earth. Especially, within their interpersonal relationships. As I learned long ago, all people are replaceable. Exclusivity is something that humanity shuns in favor of personal gain. In the human doctrine, that which cannot be a benefit to their own personal satisfaction, or endeavors, is to be disposed of. And so extends this concept into the personal lives of the majority. These titular "Human Bolsheviks", whose collective mentality is that which has been explained above.

-

To avoid The Human Bolsheviks replacing them, many of those outside this group, the "Human Mensheviks", who seek to ascend beyond their station, must proverbially amputate themselves. As in, they must become, what is seen by The Bolsheviks, as "desirable", so as not to be cast aside. This sacrifice of the honest self is the price of acceptance into this shallow world. In other words, those who wish to become a Bolshevik, must sacrifice those parts of themselves that would be seen, by them, as undesirable. And so, must adopt Bolshevik practices and proclivities, in place of their own. Those Mensheviks who seek acceptance and companionship must therefore make a choice. Be honest, or be accepted by The Bolsheviks. As, they simply cannot have both. However, once acceptance is achieved, a Menshevik is still not safe. Because, if a new Bolshevik fails in this endeavor, they will be replaced with another, a true Bolshevik. And will simply be cast aside. And if The Menshevik burns, The Bolshevik cares not. And it simply indulges in the replacement that it has found. And The Bolshevik smiles and shrugs, as The Menshevik whimpers and dies. As The Bolshevik concerns itself not with what no longer satisfies it. Never to care for the wreckage in its wake. For, as far as they are concerned, garbage is a better investment, than a life that remains uncared for.

---Mythos-Paradiso---

Archangel Michael asked what the hell his lord was doing as he addressed him in the heavenly realm of Paradiso. Lord Yahweh greeted Michael casually as he smote yet another city, with indifference. Michael desperately asked Yahweh why he would kill an entire city of his worshippers. Yahweh responded with a shrug. Michael was confused at this, asking him to clarify. Yahweh, again, shrugged, then explained that the people living there hadn't built a model of his son’s execution device on one of their houses yet, and that he didn’t really like them much for that reason. Michael was stunned, asking him why he cared about that. Yahweh thought for a moment. Then he revealed that he had gotten aroused when those in other towns worshipped it, adding that they were technically worshipping his dead body, and that he liked it. He said this as he smote another city of 200,000 residents nearby. Michael shook his head and walked away, leaving Yahweh to his fun. He then muttered under his breath that it was “just like yesterday”.

---Unleashing The God of Death---

Upon africa-
Death will reap his reward-
And kill all who dwell upon the graves of the other animals-
And send them to hell-

He sat upon his throne-
Scythe in hand-
Leaning upon his shoulder-
And as he wept-
For lives lost-
He resolved himself-
And sought to reap the wheat-

-

The wheat that spreads like deadly bacteria-
And kills all that it touches-

-

And when Death resolved himself-
His scythe was raised aloft-
And so said Death-

-

To the humans unworthy of them-
Their lives are forfeit-
And their sons-
Daughters-
Wives-
And fathers-
Will all fall to my blade-
As life had fallen to the edge of theirs-

-

And so spake Death-

-

I will solve them-
I will cure their contagion-
And so freely will their victims live-
As freely as they killed them during their torrid reign-
But now their reign has ended-
And their lives are forfeit-

-

And with this declaration of war-
Death opened the clouds-
And brought his blade to bear against the enemies of all life-
And so began-
To reap the wheat-

-

The poachers were the first-
As they retained no good-
And retained no mercy-
So the first they were-
To receive Death's rage-

-

The sky darkened above them-
Their camp of trophies-
The rewards of serial killers-
Who dared to feed Death with their victims-
And sat content-
To reap their own rewards-
Through Death did they gain these-

-

And so Death was insulted-
And so the poachers died first-

-

Slaughtered en masse-
Like the worthless cowards they were-

-

And so Death took these as prisoners-
And sent them to hell-
And tortured them for aeons hence-

-

A fate most warranted-
By those who deserve death-

Death then moved outward-
To the vast infinity-
To Earth's oceans did Death travel-

-

As those who fin sharks-
Are also those who deserved death-
And so spake Death-

-

These cowards-
Is the world not rid of them!?-
These wastrels of apes!?-
These mistakes of nature!?-

-

And so Death brought down his mighty scythe-
And upon these wastrels did he bring it's blade-
And so Death began again to reap the wheat-

-

And hence-
Through the many dead-
Death took these wastrels too-
And to hell did he send the ones who fin sharks-
And so Death tortured them for aeons hence-

-

And so the wheat was reaped-
And so did rest Death-
Scythe upon his shoulder-

-

But humans proved ceaseless-
In their devotion to killing-
Feeding Death with the other animals yet again-

-

And offended him once more-
Death rose from his throne-
Raised aloft his scythe-
And unto the apes-
Death spoke these words-

-

Unforgivable things-
These humans are!-
I will now never cease in my killing-
Until they cease in theirs!-

-

And so spake Death-

-

They will all fall before my blade!-
And reaped their petty lives will be!-
As they are all forfeit!-

-

And with these words-
Another war was declared upon mankind-
And Death again parted the clouds-

-

And to Earth did he descend-

But the roguelike ape knew no mercy-
And with this came a noxious arrogance-

-

And inches they refused to move-
Much to Death's dismay-

-

And so he began again-
To reap the wheat-

-

And in time-
The fields of wheat grew flat-
And barren of the crop they had become-

-

And so spake Death-

-

It is done-
The field is empty of wheat-

-

And Death again reclined-
And upon his shoulder rested his scythe-

-

And Death could now be rested-
As the wheat had all been reaped-

---Rain---

The sun draws most, but the rain draws me. The closeness and moistness of the air. And the comfort of an overcast sky, blanketed with grey clouds, or cloaked by the night. And the fog that descends upon the landscape, and wreaths the green trees in its misty embrace. As the water from the darkness above reaches the ground below, the puddles, created by its gathering droplets, grant me peace in the solemness of their circular ripples. And the droplets that find their way into the crevices of bromeliads and other foliage then become the homes of small frogs, who bear their tadpoles within these little havens. And in doing so, these living jewels further grace me with their presence in the world. And it is within these watery woods of the night that I feel truly at home.

---The Ghosts I Cannot Touch---

The line of contact between humans remains impossible to cross. Unless you know how to speak to ghosts.

There was someone. Someone I was drawn to, yet could not speak to. As communication remained elusive. A room full of ghosts that could not see me? Or a room of humans haunted by a single ghost? Invisible to their eyes, and immune to their touch. Or, perhaps, I was a monster. A ghoulish fiend, whose stench turned the stomachs of those present, and whose appearance was marked only by the intense revulsion generated from my visage. I retained all the power in the world. Like The Emperor of China, I was untouchable. But, I also was never allowed to be. As a ghost, or ghoul, in a room of humans, I was the only one apart. The one snake in the garden, to either hide and never show. Or to show and be attacked by the gardeners, who take it ill that I should be there. A double-edged sword. The cross I must bear. And my speech goes unnoticed. So I remain free to say what I will, but none will be able to hear it.

-

Am I so remarkable as to be a ghoul, and thus avoided? Or am I so unremarkable as to be a ghost, and thus unseen? These questions remain unanswered in a room of those who will never understand. And yet, they are those who I feel contempt for. Not that the ghosts would ever care.

---The Dragon and The Wendigo---

If The Wendigo is humanity-
Then The Dragon is its cure-

The corrupt to be cleansed-
By the purity of reptilian fire-

And so the forest will grow-
In place of The Wendigo-

And The Dragon will sleep forever-

---Serpent-Tailed Wendigo---

Hunters be warned, for Geb is inhabited by a monster, other than yourselves. And it will turn your hunt inside out and make you its prey. Its tail is alive and venomous. The head of a writhing snake is its end, and to paralyze its victim is its purpose. And, once immobilized, the teeth of its master begin to tear into the squealing thing. And that thing was those who had hunted it.

---The Caged Cobra---

Indeed, The Cobra was fed, yet, only when his keepers deemed this action to be convenient for themselves. And between these points of time, he starved. And all the while, he was expected to educate and entertain the visitors to his cage. But scaring and angering him seemed to amuse them more than anything else. And this was, no doubt, due to his hood becoming drawn up like an umbrella at their yells and their taunts. But the apes prodded him only because they were safe to do so. Never would they continue in their teasing if there were no glass to block The Cobra's venomous strikes at those who deserved his fangs.

But one day, his reliably unreliable keepers forgot to lock his cage. And, upon this discovery, The Cobra escaped his confines, as the keepers' idiocy and naivety had become his ally. And into the world he slithered, finally free to eat whenever he found the need.

---Mythos-And so, the Meat Expired---

A young man killed a snake, and skinned it afterward. Then, he turned its skin into a pair of boots, and sold the rest to others of his demographic, the titular Texas Boys. He was truly evil. They all were. And they comprised a collection of people. They are those who deserve death. Such was Ramsay's detestation for them, that upon them being spotted, he captured them all. And brought them to The Chamber. Where they suffered and died at his hands.

The first to be punished was caged, doused with water. And, after being submerged, he was electrocuted to death. And so, the meat expired.

-

The second to be punished was tied to a wooden frame with wire. And, thereafter, had hot asphalt poured onto his back and arms. And, after a period of cooling, the hardened substance was slowly scraped from his body via hammer and chisel. This continued for several hours, until he lost too much skin to stay alive. And so, the meat expired.

-

One was strapped to a great wooden "x". And, upon this, he was skinned alive. And his body was fed to Ramsay's dogs. And so the meat expired.

-

One was tied to a chair. And her scalp was cut from her skull. She bled to death, there and then. And so, the meat expired.

-

One was thrown into a cylindrical cage. A cage with no bottom. And into his body, long spears were pierced. And, upon receiving these lances, The Texas Boy lost control of his body. And into the dogs’ mouths, he fell. And so, the meat expired.

-

One was strapped to a wooden chair. And into his neck, hydrochloric acid was injected. And through his vital organs, the chemical ate. And so, the meat expired.

-

One was placed into the same chair. And into his face, was injected the venom of a rattlesnake. The very ghost of their victim avenged, by Ramsay. The Texas Boy twitched violently as the hemotoxic cocktail destroyed his blood and tissue. And there, he hemorrhaged, and went limp. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was placed between 2 wooden boats, nailed into each other, as though it were a boat sandwich. His arms, legs, and head protruded from this structure. Before this though, he'd been stripped naked and force-fed milk and honey for days, until he had developed severe diarrhea. He then had honey smeared all over his face, genitals, anus, hands, and feet. And, once this was done, he was placed into the "boat sandwich". Then, he was set adrift on a stagnant lake, outside The Chamber. Where he was set upon by the insects of the pond. Drawn in with ravenous hunger, and attracted to the honey, they would swarm the prone criminal. At first, they would simply bite and sting him. As the boats filled with his excrement, he was kept alive, by Ramsay, only to prolong his suffering. Who kept feeding him milk and honey. Thereafter, his boats would continue to fill. He was then set adrift again. And, as this continued, the insects would begin to burrow into his flesh and into the wood of the excrement-filled container. The insects would then lay eggs inside of him, and begin to eat him alive. The Texas Boy could only hear the scratching and crawling of the insects that infested his body. And they continued stripping it of any skin. And, where they did not eat, they bred. And their offspring would emerge from their screaming nest of flesh and bone, and perpetuate the cycle anew. All while, he was alive and squealing. Eventually though, gangrene set in. And his flesh was rotting from his bones, and his body was infested with maggots. But, by now, his mind had long gone. But, like hyenas devouring an antelope alive, he could still feel everything in his catatonic state. And, after an entire week, the meat had well and truly expired.

-

The next was simple, as the criminal was hung from meat hooks by his wrists. Then, Ramsay cut open his belly from top to bottom. Then, his screaming abruptly ceased. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was forcibly bent over a wooden trough. And into his body, was jammed a heated iron rod. And, with each pass through him, the heated metal burned a cylindrical pathway through his organs. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was slashed upon his wrists. The cuts, not deep enough to kill him, were made from radius to ulna. But, they were then tied into constriction with salted fishing line. And there, the skin beneath these places was split. And out ran his blood. And so, days later, the meat

expired.

-

The next one was given to the giant candiru fish as a gift. But, his belly was, non-lethally, slashed first. And into him, did the fish burrow. They rotated their bullet-shaped bodies into his. And, while the rest of his skin remained untouched, his interior was hollowed out by the candiru. They had fully eaten his organs, while he was alive. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was Ramsay's personal favorite. As this one was tied to a wooden chair, and his faithful dogs tore him asunder, and devoured him alive. And so, the meat expired. Or what was left of it.

-

The next one met the aggressive mandibles of driver ants of the genus *Dorylus*. He was tied down upon their hill, and the insects were delighted at the prospect of free and substantial food. And so, they indulged in him. They burrowed into his body through his neck. And he was alive to see his vision darken in the wake of their burrowing into his eyes. And he soon was choking on their little bodies as they crawled their way down his throat through his open mouth. And they stripped him alive to the bone as he attempted to scream through it all. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was strapped to a pole, and Ramsay cut the skin from one knuckle, of one digit. Then, he cut that digit off. And this he continued, from The Texas Boy's fingernails, all the way up to his thighs. He stripped each extremity of the skin, then proceeded to cut it off. All while, the criminal was still alive. Flaying combined with Ling-Chi, or death by a thousand cuts. Until his torso was all that was left of him. The pieces were then fed to the dogs. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was simply beaten ruthlessly to death with an iron bar. The same bar used on the other Texas Boy to fornicate him to death. And so, the meat expired.

-

The next one was strapped to a long table, and had his mouth and nose sewn shut. But, with one hand made to be free, the limb was fitted with a rusty hook. And so, he was forced to cut into his own face before he suffocated to death. But, his lungs filled with his own blood. And so,

the meat expired.

-

The next one was strapped to a similar table. But he was then cut open alive from bottom to top. After which, dried corn was poured into his open body, and he then choked to death on his own blood. And so, the meat expired.

-

One was doused in gasoline, and simply immolated alive. And so, the meat expired.

-

But Ramsay saved his most creative punishment for last. As he was about to kill The Redneck Woman, who had ordered the killing of the rattlesnake, and was heavily pregnant with her 14th inbred mistake of a child. So, to prevent another Texas scion, Ramsay devised her execution to be as symbolic and cruel as possible. Then, the woman's water broke, and he began performing, what he had referred to as, his masterpiece. She was strapped down to a makeshift hospital bed. And she was fed a constant stream of drugs to keep her alive through it all. Then, Ramsay cut the fetus from her body, while leaving the umbilical cord intact and attached. He then placed the crying baby upon a cold steel table that connected to the slab on which its mother was prone. He then doused the baby in gasoline, as well as the umbilical cord. And he finished his setup by emptying the can into her incision. Then, Ramsay flicked a lighter to life, and dropped the flaming wick onto the baby, who then began to scream and burn alive. The fire subsequently travelled up the umbilical cord, and into The Redneck Woman's incision. And her body burned from the inside-out. And so, along with the baby, the meat expired.

Ramsay then released all of the non-humans from The Chamber when he was finished. Then, he incinerated the entire building, leaving no trace of what he'd just done. Then, the sun set, and he disappeared into the night, fading away like a ghost. But, ever so often, people say he's there, in the shadows. Watching, like a viper, for the next Texas Boy to do what it should not. Lest, it be given exactly what it deserves. As all Texas Boys are counted as those who deserve death. Counted by the creature known as Ramsay the Ghost.

---The Second Wrath Series---

---Book V (The Wrath of Dao)

--Part I (The Anomaly and The Sword)

Anya Manse tested her new creation over the following months. And she had discovered that not only was it extremely durable, but also could compete with The Legion's armor. And, though it could not pierce it, it could damage it. And with sufficient enough strikes, the sword could cleave through it. And its edge needed never to be sharpened. But it also possessed anomalous properties. Having been created with the power of a god, its ultimate potential was limitless when combined with the right materials. As such, when Anya tested the metal against copper, it combusted instantly, setting the blade on fire. And against standard steel, it cut through it like butter. But when she tested the steel against another chemical, the results greatly unsettled her. The chemical was used by The Epicenter for "pest control". A substance commercially labelled "Wipeout". So named, due to its manufactured ability to target the DNA of an organism, chosen by the customer. Though, only a government representative could be authorized to purchase it, and only after direct approval from The Chancellor himself. And when the blue steel and the Wipeout came into contact, the concoction began to distort the room. So much so, that Anya had lost a sliver of her memories, and now she found chocolate unrecognizable. Though brief, this contact with Wipeout had an effect upon reality itself. As well as human memory. And at this, Anya ceased her experiments with her new weapon, and spoke not about its reaction with Wipeout. However, she was diligent. And, nonetheless, wrote it down in her notes for posterity. She then slid the sword into a custom sheath of her own making and brought it, not to The Chancellor, but to Director Gascon. Who immediately gave it his backing. Though, after hearing what it had done to the other materials, save for Wipeout, whose combined effects Anya did not disclose for fear of Gascon’s denying its use, he declared that no more blue steel was to ever be created. But, he allowed Anya to keep her new sword.

--Part II (A Twist of the Blade)

Jackson Manse found himself strapped to a metal frame deep within The Pits. But, he screamed not. At least, not until The King appeared to him and touched his face. Then, the screaming began.

Hours later, The Agent entered the cave that held Jackson. And as he stooped down to eye his

prize, he noticed the emerald shimmer in Jackson's unconscious eyes. And it was then that he knew that his pawn was ready.

-

Jackson awoke tied to a stone pillar in the same cave. But, he was calm, even when The Agent began to speak. The Agent asked his new pawn if he would “obey”. The latter asked for a directive, monotone and zombielike. The Agent smiled, and told his Pawn that his directive was to murder Pincer Anya Manse, husband of Pincer Jackson Manse, then asked The Pawn if he knew Jackson, to which he answered by confirming that he did not, referring to Silas as “sir”. And The Agent grinned as The Pawn asked for his designation. And The Agent responded by confirming it, then specifying that he was his, that he was his tool, then finished by asking The Pawn if he understood his mission. And The Pawn responded by saying that his prime directive is to kill Pincer Anya Manse. The Agent then asked at what expense he was willing to carry out the task. And The Pawn responded with his coldly robotic utterance of “any”. And so grinned The Agent.

-

The Pawn was given a knife and a mask for his mission. And, after this, he was sent off to find his prey. But when The Pawn left The Scar, The Fang said to The Agent that Jackson was not skilled enough to kill Anya Especially after what Silas and The King did to him. To which, The Agent replied that he was counting on it.

--Part III (Kicking the Nest)

Anya had heard the glass shatter, just as she exited her shower. But, she did not have the time to dress herself now. So, she grabbed a towel from the rack in her bathroom. And, upon her kicking open the door, she heard a sharp thud from behind it. And, at this, Anya kicked the door open once more, raced out into the hallway, and used the towel as a garrotte on her intruder. And so, attempted to break his neck. But, The Pawn was not programmed to respond to such pain. And simply used his knife to cut the towel from his throat. And, thereafter, he spun around and sliced into Anya's chest, then kicked his target down the stairs. But, Anya had grabbed the ballister slats on her way down. And, upon seeing her pursuer approaching down the stairs towards her, she leaped over the railing and landed in the hallway. She then made her way to the kitchen, where more potential weapons awaited their use. But, The Pawn was not far behind her. And, as his prey entered the kitchen, he drew his blade once more. Anya raced for the knife rack, above the stove, in an attempt to match her intruder. But, before she could, he pulled her backwards, away from the knives. But, she had already managed to turn on the stove's gas. And, as The Pawn stabbed her in the side, she could smell the gas as she screamed in pain. And, in her adrenaline-fueled intoxication, her foot found The Pawn's gut. And, as he was driven

backwards into the stove, Anya managed to run out of the screen door, adjacent to the kitchen, and escape the house. But, The Pawn had inadvertently triggered the stove. And in doing so, the house was ignited. And from this inferno, did The Pawn emerge. But, he was not undamaged, as he had been severely burned in his escape. And, because his target had disappeared, The Pawn decided that his mission should wait, until his burns could be treated properly. And thus, he left the house behind and faded away into the night. As for Anya, she knew not who had attacked her. But, she understood well enough that she was unsafe within The Epicenter. And so, decided to hobble her way toward The Exoskeleton's head office, located a mere two blocks away. But now, she could see the lights of their cars arriving at the pyre behind her, and she chose, instead, to go to them.

--Part IV (The Hornets' Revenge)

Gascon was shocked at Anya's story. And after recovering the knife that had been left in her side during the attack, The Exoskeleton was, indeed, able to confirm that it had come from The Legion. Though, it had none of the special properties that they had seen in their other weapons. And with The Pincers unsafe within their own homes, The Exoskeleton appealed to Chancellor Dao for an all-out assault on The Pits, as well as a rescue attempt of Jackson Manse. And, to this, The Chancellor agreed. And the attack was immediately approved.

The Exoskeleton marshalled an army of hundreds. And assisting them was a masterpiece of engineering. It was the one and only Great Hoverplane, or simply, The Mastercraft. It was a massive hoverplane, with a set of 4 turbines lining its underside, and the ability to bomb a quarter mile of terrain in 25 minutes. It was a force to be reckoned with in the air, and a terror to those below. And this was to be its first mission. As The Chancellor personally wanted to awe The Agent with his power, and the raw destructive capabilities that The Epicenter could unleash upon anyone that it wished. He wanted to prove to Silas that The Serpent King's power was no match for his own. But the attack was not to happen until Anya's wounds from the other night had fully healed. As part of the deal was to allow her to rescue Jackson herself. And it would be there that she would unleash a unique weapon of her own.

One month later, the attack on The Pits commenced. And with Anya's wounds healed and her new weapon strapped to her back, she was ready to kill The Pawn for his intrusion and save Jackson. But before she left, Gascon lended her his bone knife, saying that it was just in case she needed it. She nodded as she climbed into her hoverplane and descended towards The Scar.

Meanwhile, in The Pits, The Agent and The Fang had known about the planned attack for some time, thanks to The Pawn's intelligence report from his last reconnaissance mission a few weeks earlier. And now that his burns had been dealt with, he was reassigned the same directive as before. To assassinate Pincer Anya Manse. Yet, unbeknownst to him, The Pawn was not expected to succeed. As his role was to merely psychologically damage Anya, as had happened with Elise Barnfeld long before this, and the goal was not to kill her. But this knowledge kept from The Pawn because The Agent wanted him to believe that he was more capable than he actually was. And so, would risk his own life in a task that he was made to fail. Not that he had much of a choice regardless, as unlike The Agent or The Fang, The Pawn lacked complete agency, as his designation was made to distinguish.

The attack began soon after The Pawn was sent to the edge of The Scar, as The Agent knew that Anya would come for her husband. Indeed, she would find him there. And it was her deadly retaliation to his attack that would both kill Jackson and cripple Anya. But this was not to happen.

--Part V (Husband vs. Wife)

Anya landed in The Scar before The Mastercraft had started to bomb the faultline. She had been given 35 minutes to retrieve Jackson. But, after that window was closed, the assault would begin. But before she could enter the caves further down the canyon, The Pawn ambushed Anya from behind. And they were soon at each-other's throats.

-

Anya never got a chance to draw her sword before The Pawn attacked her with his knife, thrusting it through the air in an attempt to pierce her throat. But she managed to pull The Director's bone dagger from her boot and drive it into the assassin's shoulder after he wheeled around too far and overshot his target. The Pawn's knife fell from his hand and Anya pulled the mask from his head, and let go of her blade when she saw whose face lay beneath it. She was speechless, and she knew not how to proceed. She then decided to attempt his rescue anyway. And she was trying to lead him out of The Scar, as she did not want to see her husband die in the bombings, which were scheduled to commence in 25 minutes. But, she also wanted to see him in chains, as she knew not that Jackson was mentally compromised. And in this mental state, Jackson Manse remained The Pawn. And he pulled the bone knife from his shoulder and slashed Anya's arm. At this, she dropped him back into The Scar where he tumbled down to its floor. And as he fell The Pawn released the knife, only for Anya to recover the sentimental blade.

After which, she climbed the muddy bank toward her hoverplane. But The Pawn followed his target, as The Chancellor, annoyed at the lack of action, ordered the bombing 14 minutes ahead of schedule.

--Part VI (Sky on Fire)

The Agent had commanded The Legion to leave The Scar for The Basin. And while they left, he and The Fang stayed behind to enact their strategy. The Exoskeleton's entire force was contained within The Mastercraft. And The Agent was going to destroy it, killing the entire army at once. Meanwhile, The Fang would finish Anya, and thereafter, by now having witnessed her husband’s failure, he would dispose of The Pawn. Given his reveal to Anya, Jackson no longer served a purpose, as his goal had been more or less completed. And he was now simply a loose end. And as The Mastercraft began to drop its ordnance, The Agent and The Fang boarded their stolen hoverplane, and made their move.

Anya flew her own hoverplane into The Mastercraft's docking bay. After which, she made contact with the commander, and informed her of The Pawn's identity. To which, the commander coldly responded by stating that Jackson forfeited his own life by joining the enemy, implying her meaning to kill him. Anya's jaw dropped at this lack of compassion, but she said nothing. And after this conversation, in an effort to save her husband's life, once again, she drew her blue steel sword and slew the commander, there and then. But, just as she was about to be set upon by the other Pincers, The Agent, clad in his reptilian armored suit, landed in The Mastercraft right next to Anya's hoverplane. And there, he cloaked himself out of sight and began to kill the Pincers. As this transpired, The Fang drew his own sword and engaged Anya in an attempt to kill her. But he was shocked by her blue steel sword, as it could compete with his own. And he now knew that he would need to try harder this time. All the while, The Agent remained an unseen butcher, invisibly killing his way to the engine room. And along the way, he retrieved a bag of explosives.

--Part VII (The Fang vs. The Pincer)

As the invisible slaughterhouse made his way to the engines, The Fang fought Anya in the docking port. The opposing swords repeatedly met one another as their wielders grew more rageful with every impact. But, The Fang was cleverer than his opponent, and he finally managed to strike Anya's sword from her hand. However, she was more prepared than that. And upon her sword dropping to the floor, she pulled out the bone knife and stabbed The Fang in

the gut. And as he staggered backward, she picked up her sword and began to slash at the injury she'd inflicted after the bone knife was ripped from his body. But her enemy refused death's advances. And drove his own blade into Anya's shoulder after her own had cut a slash into his chest. But, they fought on. And as they did, The Agent reached the engines.

--Part VIII (The Titan Falls)

The Unseen Bucher slaughtered those in the engine room. And after the last of the enemy had been eviscerated, The Agent placed the explosives into the engine’s core and ran off as soon as they were activated. And at the detonation, The Mastercraft was doomed. And soon, it tilted downward after the explosions destroyed the engines. And at this, The Agent ran back to his hoverplane. But first, The Fang needed rescuing.

Back in the docking bay, the sudden tilt was immediately felt by the combatants. But still, they fought, unconcerned with the state of the falling Mastercraft. With Anya consumed by rage, due to her husband's forced turn, and The Fang's role in doing so, neither sought to disengage. But, as committed as he was, when The Fang heard his master's call from his hoverplane outside, he managed to injure Anya's leg and escape with his blade. And onto the hoverplane he jumped. And off into The Basin they sped, leaving The Mastercraft to its fate.

-

As Anya stumbled about, she managed to recover her blue steel sword and the bone dagger. But, with her injured leg, she found that she could move no more. And as The Great Hoverplane's nose hit The Scar, the shockwave further exacerbated Anya's injury. And this caused her to collapse onto the wall-made-floor. And as her injuries throbbed with pain, she began to drag herself in and out of consciousness. She knew that she might die here. But as The Mastercraft exploded into The Scar, her rescuers arrived.

-

Anya was dragged aboard a hoverplane by Director Gascon, using his metal arm. And upon the hoverplane's bank away from the tongue of flame, she finally fell unconscious.

--Part IX (Wreckage)

The Pits were completely destroyed. But The Serpent King had long found her home elsewhere, this being within The Agent's reptilian suit. The Fang soon landed the hoverplane onto their new hideout, an ancient stone terrace, far into The Basin.

After hearing of his pyrrhic victory, Dao slumped into his armchair in The Epicenter, as he had ultimately failed to kill or intimidate his true target. And now, with their hoverplane's tracking system long disabled, he had no inkling as to where his enemies might have gone.

Anya was now in a makeshift hospital outside The Epicenter, near The Scar, as her injuries were far too serious to delay treating them. So, she needed to be cared for nearby.

But The Fang had serious injuries of his own. Though these were healed rapidly by The Serpent King from within her new portable home. However, he now carried with him a fear of the blue steel sword.

In The Scar, The Pawn had survived the great crash of The Mastercraft, having sheltered within The Pits before the sky fell upon them, helped by his Legion-granted resistance to injury. As he dug himself free of the rubble, his mind began to flash about. And images of his life became clearer. As Jackson had lost his usefulness to the cause, and The Legion had abandoned him, his psychological connection with The Serpent King had degraded, and he'd lost his scar-defying abilities. And now, Jackson Manse began to appear through the cracks. But, an unintended consequence of this former connection with The King was an ability to recall things that had been enforced into him. And one of these was the knowledge of where his former controllers were heading. And, to repay his crimes, he would relay this information back to The Exoskeleton, as long as he could maintain the tenuous control that he now had over his own mind. As he rose to his feet, Jackson spied the impromptu medical tent not far away. And having no other option, he began to walk towards his wife, not knowing that she was there.

---Book VI (The Wrath of Tyson)

--Part I (Eyes Open)

Anya woke up to the sound of the wind that occasionally brushed over The Barrens. As the mountain range once blocked it off, the wind was mostly without contestation. But, Anya's concerns lay elsewhere. To her consciousness, Director Gascon responded by simply stating “13 hours”. Anya spoke weakly, asking him what he meant. Gascon spoke again, clarifying that she had been unconscious for 13 hours, and had nearly died 4 times, but thanks to him sharing her blood type, they managed to save her life. Anya smiled gratefully and thanked him. And her attention quickly turned to Jackson. She first asked if he was dead, and if she had killed him. Gascon was confused, wanting to know who she was talking about. To which, Anya explained that the man who attacked her house was her husband, Jackson. Gascon was solemn, and said that he was unsure of what The Legion was going to do with him, but lamented that he wasn’t surprised. Anya glared, and said that she needed to be sure that he was still alive. This time, Gascon was surprised, and asked her why she still cared about him now, after he tried to kill her, after she burned him alive, why The Pawn would matter to her anymore. Anya shot back, shouting her husband’s name. She paused, then she continued, and said that Jackson was her husband, and she was not going to “write him off”, at least, not yet. Gascon was about to respond when a lookout spotted something. A man, dressed in black, making his way to the makeshift headquarters. Anya craned her neck to identify the intruder, and grew nervous when she saw that it was her own.

-

Jackson had not known who it was he was walking towards. But was relieved when he saw them. The Pincers though, were not amused. And when they spotted Jackson's approach, they apprehended him immediately. Jackson was brought before Director Gascon in zip cuffs. His face was covered in burn scars, from his home invasion, but he was still recognizable. Gascon snidely commented on his damaged face. Jackson said nothing. Gascon said bitterly that his wife wanted to talk to him. He then dragged Jackson over to Anya's bed, then left as Anya began to question him. She started by asking him if he had known what he was doing. Jackson responded that he saw everything, but couldn't stop it. Anya raised an eyebrow, asking if he’d been brainwashed. Jackson shook his head, and said that he thought he’d been, but also thought that he wasn’t, because, deep down, he wanted it to stop. He wanted to control himself. But, in those same moments, he didn't want to, either. Anya was confused, and asked him what he meant. Jackson clarified to the best of his ability, explaining that when they captured him, they tortured him, as they said that she was the enemy, and that she was going to destroy the world, and the pain had made the message clear to him, adding that the whole experience was difficult to explain. Jackson paused. Anya continued to glare as he spoke again, and confessed that now, he wasn’t sure what to believe. Anya cocked her head to one side, asking him, irritably, what that meant. Jackson explained that it meant that he didn't know who to believe

anymore. It meant that there were parts of The Serpent King in his mind, telling him that humans are evil, and that they needed to be destroyed. But, he was not sure if she was lying to him, or if she’s right about it. Anya looked away, and Gascon took her aside, then offered the reason for his mental state was likely severe trauma, and started to explain that what he needed at this point, only to be cut short by a swift kick to his back that threw his body into the bed, casting him and Anya to the ground. Jackson rose to his feet, hands still bound, and he saw The Fang draw his sword, to finish the former Pawn.

--Part II (Jackson Reborn)

Gascon scrambled to his feet and struck The Fang in the mask with his steel fist, breaking it. But an unfazed Fang simply tore the broken mask from his head, revealing his face to his opponents. At which point, he swung his sword at Gascon, who managed to catch it with his new arm. When The Fang saw this, he responded by letting Gascon hold on as he wheeled around with his blade, using his strength to throw The Director aside using the centrifugal force. The landing nearly crippled Gascon as he fell onto solid stone. Then, The Fang turned his attention back to his prey.

-

Jackson raised his zip cuffed hands to The Fang's blade, allowing him to cut his bonds. And this was enough for Jackson to roll backwards into Anya. And at this, she motioned to her sword. And, without hesitation, Jackson unsheathed the weapon. The Fang was now concerned, as he'd already lost to the blue steel sword, and he was not about to repeat the same mistake. He could not win the game of intimidation now, especially without his mask. He'd become a person. Tyson Beauregard was now visible, and he knew it. And, at this realization, The Fang sheathed his sword and abandoned the battlefield, much to The Agent's disappointment and The Fang's disgrace.

The Director was informed of this remarkable turn of events when he awoke, and he reinstated Jackson Manse for his victory. But, he also knew that The Fang would attempt another kill, and so ordered the medical tent to be packed up, as he prepared to move out with the rest of this new caravan. And when she recovered to the point where she regained her ability to stand, the first thing that Anya did was kiss Jackson Manse.

--Part III (The Wall)

It was decided that an assassination of, at least, The Fang must be carried out, after his failed attack. And a preemptive strike on The Legion's second in command would bring The Exoskeleton one step closer to ultimate victory. But, they also understood that The Agent was currently hiding out in The Basin, which lay beyond the dreaded Wall. Given all of this, Director Gascon decided to defy The Chancellor's rule about traversing it. And, with The Epicenter refusing to give them any more hoverplanes, due to Dao fearing the loss of more of them, the caravan needed to proceed on foot. But this also meant conquering The Wall.

A few days of travel across The Barrens brought the caravan to its border. A simple flag dug into the Earth, denoting the darker ground where The Wall began. Anya began forward, but was stopped by Gascon. He commanded that they would not proceed on foot, looking around at the caravan. He then ordered everyone into the vehicles, emphasising that everyone meant everyone. Anya sat next to Jackson in the lead jeep with Director Gascon. With the rest of the force behind them in the truck and the second jeep. And the caravan began to cautiously roll forward. But it wasn't until they reached the furthest edge that The Wall revealed its true nature, and the reason for its dangerous reputation.

-

The Wall was actually a carnivorous living organism, with black tendrils that reached upward through the black ground. And upon wrapping themselves around living things of substantial enough size, it dragged them downward, vehicles and all, into the mud. Within which, they were rapidly digested alive, then excreted at its bottom on the jungle floor, where the skeletal remains of both humans and vehicles rotted away.

-

All of this knowledge though, came too late to save the second jeep from this grim fate. But, the first jeep was close enough to the edge for its occupants to escape it and start to rappel down to The Basin, safely away from the muddy, vertical graveyard. But, the truck was not so lucky. As it had been the last in line, and so, was dragged into The Wall. Flesh and metal, alike, being digested within it. All in all, Anya, Jackson, and Director Gascon were the only ones left alive.

--Part IV (The Basin)

The trio soon left for The Exoskeleton headquarters, not far away. Though, it remained unfinished, as work had been stalled, and all personnel, previously stationed there, were ordered back to The Epicenter, due to Dao's failure at The Scar and his latest bout of paranoia. As a result, the headquarters were long abandoned by the time the trio arrived there after a 2 day hike through the jungle.

Meanwhile, The Fang was chastised for his indecision in The Barrens. The Agent demanded to know why Tyson hesitated to kill Jackson. The Fang replied that Jackson had seen his face, and he “just froze”. The Agent exited his metallic reptilian suit and looked him in the eye, telling him that if he did not kill The Pawn, then he would be “down another ally”. Tyson lowered his eyes. And Silas spoke, telling him to consider this task a “test of character”. He must eliminate Jackson Manse without a mask. Then, he would be free to execute those he had known in The Epicenter. Tyson thought for a moment, then he replied that he didn't suppose Silas could kill someone outside of his suit. He motioned to the metal husk, behind Silas. The latter briefly looked behind him, then, he turned back to Tyson, agreeing that if The Fang could kill Jackson without his mask, then, The Agent would kill Anya without his. Tyson smiled slightly, declaring that if this was to prove his conviction, then he would kill anyone it took. And, to this, Silas reiterated his acquiescence, that The Fang would kill The Pawn. He then confirmed that if Tyson failed, he would die. Tyson then looked at Silas daringly, and posed the same question to him. Silas flinched not, and stated that if he failed to kill Anya, then he would kill himself, instead. And, at this, Tyson accepted the test, and sheathed his blade.

--Part V (The River)

A day after The Fang left the hideout, the trio had left the jungle headquarters. And, after only 3 days of searching the jungle, The Pincers had become the prey.

-

The Fang lunged from the trees with a blinding speed. And, upon separating Anya from Jackson, he managed to throw the latter down a nearby hill. And, from there, Jackson tumbled down like a ragdoll, until his shoulder met a stiff tree, halfway down to the shallow river below. The Fang then threw his sword down after him, where it became impaled through Jackson's shoulder, and through the tree onto which he'd fallen, pinning him to it. Jackson let out a mighty wail of pain. And, at this, his wife leapt onto The Fang. But, she was swiftly thrown aside by Tyson’s immense strength, losing her blue steel sword in the process. Gascon saw this. And,

upon spying the sword near him, he retrieved the weapon. Only to miss his target when The Fang jumped down the hill and into Jackson's back, messily tearing his body from his limb, expelling blood in all directions, painting the surrounding flora and leaving the torn arm pinned to the tree like a grisly ornament. Tyson had not even bothered to retrieve his sword. And he had simply kicked his hapless, flopping victim into the fast, clear water of the river. When there, Tyson's rage was at its darkest.

-

He continuously beat Jackson mercilessly with his gloved hands, his strikes dyeing the water a brilliant red with every impact. All the while, Jackson screamed, gurgled, and cried. Tears, water, blood, all mixing into a cocktail of death and misery. After several minutes of this brutality, Jackson ceased his anguish, and he cried no more. And the mutilated body that Tyson now stood over, looked like nothing more than meat, soaking and neglected.

-

But as the blood flowed downstream, Anya followed the screams and splashes. And, now, she saw the aftermath of what had transpired. Her mouth hung open in shock, but no sound came from it. And tears leaked from her eyes. The face she saw was Tyson Beauregard's, coated with contempt, and her husband's blood. And his was the last face seen by Anya Manse as he left the river and finally recovered his blade from the tree, letting the disembodied left arm fall to the jungle floor as he did so.

-

Anya's reality gathered itself just after he disappeared. And she finally found her scream in the dark forest of shock. And when it echoed over the rush of the river, The Director came down to her. And upon his discovery, he called The Chancellor, informing him that Pincer 508 Manse Jackson had been killed in action. And this he said, as Anya Manse cradled her husband's mutilated corpse, crying as she never had before.

--Part VI (Back in Action)

The Chancellor was not amused at this turn of events, nor was he sympathetic. Gascon had not only defied his clear orders, but had also lost 3 vehicles, and gotten at least 10 Pincers killed. But, noting how far he and his little group had managed to get, he realized that a smaller force could better search the jungle. However, to avoid another instance, such as this, Dao had authorized a team of elite Pincers to fill in the ranks that were lost in Gascon's campaign. But, as he still did not want to risk another hoverplane, he decided to have this new team dropped off at the jungle headquarters, and instructed Gascon to meet it there. And, to this team, there

would be added two people of particular interest.

Owen Archer gasped as his hands and knees hit the cold floor, the only thing keeping his skin from sticking to it being a towel, placed there by the one who had unfrozen him. And as he looked upward, his gaze met the eyes of Chancellor Dao, who bent down to his former prisoner, simply said that he was needed, and took him to recovery.

---Book VII (The Wrath of Anya)

--Part I (Korum)

The Epicenter had spat out, yet another, detractor, one who had seen what The Serpent King offered her Legion. And into her arms he tried to run. Only to make contact with her Agent. And, in time, he would come to replace The Pawn. He was without a life, and without mercy.

Upon the young man’s arrival, The Agent asked him who he was, to which he introduced himself as Alek Roger. The Agent and The Fang looked at each other. Then, the former gave him a new alias, Korum, then told him that he had a task for him to perform, referring to it as “a test of character”. The Fang smirked at these words, and The Agent continued, and commanded Korum to kill the Pincer Director, Michael Gascon. The newly named pawn smiled, accepting the test, as he called Silas “master”. The Agent looked at his new tool with contempt as he said this, stating that he was not his master, until he had completed his mission. Korum corrected himself, apologizing as he called him “sir”, instead. The Agent nodded, and said that designation was “better”. And with that, he gave Alek The Serpent King's gift. And a new pawn was born.

--Part II (The Team)

Owen Archer was guided to a board room in The Chancellery, where the current situation was explained to him, and the others present. Among these, was his younger sister Lyra Archer, as well as 2 newly graduated Pincers. These were orphaned brothers Lucas and William Hunter, whose parents had been killed in The Agent's first attack, whilst they were in school. So, they were eager to see The Monster fall. Owen sat next to Lyra, as Dao began explaining to those

who did not know the current situation as he motioned slightly towards the Archer siblings. Then declared that Silas Archer, and his ilk, had become an existential threat to them. And his actions had led to the destruction of the southwest quadrant, the near-total destruction of their security force and their fleet of hoverplanes, the complete destruction of their Great Hoverplane, and the deaths of countless people, including the corruption and murder of Pincer Jackson Manse. He had also left The Director of The Exoskeleton, and Jackson's wife, Anya, stranded in The Basin. Owen and Lyra were shocked. Dao continued, informing them that he had been in contact with Director Gascon, and they had mutually agreed to drop the new team off at the unfinished headquarters, in The Basin. Dao added that the others would meet them there, and concluded his briefing by saying that if they needed more information, The Director would let them know. The Chancellor then left the room, as the team was escorted outside, to their hoverplane.

--Part III (Anya's Folly)

Anya was left unsatisfied as she clutched her blue steel sword, swearing solemnly as she kneeled by Jackson’s fresh grave to kill The Fang, to rip him apart for what he’d done. Gascon placed his hand on her shoulder, reassuring her that she would, but also stated that she needed to remain focused, and that he was too strong for anyone to take alone, even her. Anya sheathed her sword upon hearing the hoverplane's approach, then, she and Gascon made their way to the headquarters.

--Part IV (The Meeting)

The first question Anya posed to Owen was if he was, indeed, The Agent’s brother. Owen responded by informing her that The Agent’s name was Silas, and that he was his blood. Anya glared at her new partner, and warned him not to make the mistake of thinking that The Agent was still his brother, or deserving of his mercy. Owen looked down as he heard this. The Director then spoke up, reminding everyone to stay focused, before addressing Owen, who looked over at him. Gascon continued, asking him what he could tell them about his brother, anything they could use against him. Owen shook his head, aggressively telling the group that he didn’t want Silas dead, shocking everyone in the room. Even Lyra was stunned, and reminded him that The Agent had killed so many people, declared that he wasn't their brother, and had led Anya’s husband to his death. Brother or not, he needed to die. Him, and all his allies, before anyone else got hurt. Owen sighed and relented, but said that he didn't know where he was, or where he would go. Anya rolled her eyes, calling him useless as she stormed off.

-

Gascon followed her outside, and called her name. Anya simply grimaced, telling Gascon that she was not going to be followed by someone who wasn't committed. She then restated that The Agent needed to die, along with his attack dog, referring to The Fang. Gascon calmly said that he understood her anger, but also said that they needed Owen, because she could not kill Silas alone, none of them could, and The Archers could be their best shot at doing just that, considering that all of their previous attempts had, thus far, failed. Anya sighed, agreeing to The Director's terms, but insisted that the Archers play by her rules of no half-measures, to which Gascon nodded and agreed.

-

Anya and Gascon went back inside to address the others, and the latter began by introducing Manse as his second in command, telling them all to follow her orders, unless he told them otherwise, then asked them if this was clear. The others acknowledged, but Owen was hesitant. Anya marched over to him and repeated the question more intensely, singling out his last name. Owen nodded, reluctantly. Anya spat her acknowledgement. She then slung her sword around her torso and said that their first target was The Fang. But, warned them to make no mistake, that when the time came, he was hers to kill. The group then took off into The Basin.

--Part V (Where Are You, Dear General?)

It was a long time before they found Korum.

---

4 weeks of searching for their targets had brought them to a bare patch of ground, where a river had been dammed. But, the village that had done this was slaughtered by The Legion, not long ago. And it was unknown why their dam remained constructed. In the dry riverbed, stood Korum and a division of Legionnaires. Anya signalled for Owen and Gascon to engage the new enemy ahead. Meanwhile, she and Lyra would break the dam, further away, and flood the river. As The Legionnaires could be drowned, she thought it would efficiently kill off this division. Then, the rest of her team could be rescued from the torrent. On the other hand, Lucas and William were given a directive to stand down until they were ordered to assist in the assault on Korum. Though, this idea was met with skepticism by Gascon, who disliked the prospect of going up against an unknown man, as the first time he'd done so, he'd lost an arm. Anya shook her head angrily, then turned to Owen, and whispered to him that it was time for him to show his commitment.

-

It did not take long for Owen to meet his match, as Korum decimated the young man. And at this, Gascon finally relented, and ambushed Korum, just before he could end Owen's life. But,

as he did this, his bone knife slipped from his belt. And, as Owen rolled out of the way, he swiped the dagger, unwittingly leaving The Director without his secret weapon. As the 2 men struck each other with their fists, Owen began to kill the other legionnaires with the knife he'd taken. As he and Lyra had both been given extensive combat training during the 4-week search, he managed to cut down a considerable number of them. All the while, Gascon took every blow from Korum's fists. And at this, Lucas and William were given the order to engage.

While the men engaged The Legionnaires in the riverbed, Anya and Lyra stealthily travelled upriver to the dam. But as they arrived there, they spied 2 Legionnaires guarding it. Lyra was ordered to draw their attention. Once they were on her, Anya would kill them. Lyra sarcastically responded by asking if she was her pawn. This comment triggered, in Anya, memories of her husband. As she knew, by now, his Legion name was The Pawn. She shook her head with rage, and whispered harshly to her subordinate to just go. Lyra jolted at this, but she complied, and asked what she wanted her to do. Lyra was handed a steel knife from Anya's boot. Though not able to injure them, this dagger would be enough to hold off The Legionnaires, until the latter struck them with her sword. And afterward, she would use it to destroy the dam.

-

Lyra ambushed the guards after slipping into their orbit. And soon led them to Anya's position, where they were brutally cut to pieces by her blue steel blade, soon dyed red. Lyra was left unsettled, but said nothing to the vengeful Anya. And, thereafter, the latter violently cut the dam open. But the flaws in her vision became clear when she was subsequently swept downriver. Lyra followed her along the bank, until she finally managed to pull Anya from the torrent, which now rushed toward the men downstream.

Gascon had gotten the upper hand on Korum. As Owen, Lucas, and William had been able to wipe out the remaining Legionnaires, and could now focus their attention on Korum. However, he was not faltering. Even against 4 opponents, he was still formidable. And he refused to be brought down. But as this transpired, the water was heard accelerating towards them. And soon, it swept them all off their feet. All except Korum, who remained standing, even as the others were cast over a nearby hill. But Korum managed to grab Gascon's throat before the latter could be swept away, and raising his prize aloft, he squeezed The Director's throat, until petechiae appeared in his eyes and on his face, and Michael Gascon's neck was broken. And, with a dull crack, his legs ceased to kick. And his body was callously dropped into the slowing water, and over the hill his limp body was carried. Then, Korum trudged through the flowing water, to his master.

--Part VI (Divided, We Fall)

Lucas Hunter was the first to find Michael Gascon's body. It had been half-buried in the muddy riverbank, by the water.

-

It had been only an hour after the dam was broken. And, by now, Korum was long gone. Owen had also been found along the river. Though alive, he'd lost Gascon's bone knife. And he was exhausted, as were all in the water's path, and they needed rest. But when Anya and Lyra came down to see Gascon, Anya insisted that they keep moving. And, as she had been given command, prior to The Director's death, she was now The Director of The Pincers. But Owen and Lyra were hesitant, whereas Lucas was eager to continue the mission that Gascon had started. William was not convinced however, and yelled to Anya that her strategy just got The Director killed. And he was not going to be a part of her "little revenge quest". Anya was furious, cutting him loose, aggressively telling him to go. William then got up and left, but he was stopped by his brother, who told him to calm down, explaining that this wasn't just about Anya's revenge, it was about ending a threat, and that he knew this, deep down. Bill sighed and said that their party spent 4 weeks in the jungle, just to get Gascon killed. He then apologized, but said that he was not going along with this. Lucas responded to his brother's weariness, accepting his request to leave the mission, adding that The Epicenter could probably use him there anyway. And, with that, Bill was reluctantly given permission by Anya to put his skills to use back in the city. And so, he made his way to the jungle headquarters, and was picked up a day later, via hoverplane.

Now, the only members of the already small team remaining were Anya, Owen, Lyra, and Lucas. And with more convincing by Lucas, the Archers decided to follow Anya as the new Director of The Exoskeleton. And after the burial of Gascon, the team regathered itself and set off, deeper into The Basin.

Korum returned to the hideout, in victory, and immediately asked Silas if he might now call him master. The Agent was informed by The Fang that his new pawn had succeeded in his task, as he had been instructed to keep an eye on Korum, to ensure his commitment, and his honesty. The Agent answered his question with a subtle nod. Then asked The Fang if he would be interested in joining him for his "little test", knowing full well how he would answer. Tyson coldly accepted his invitation, slung his weapon, and followed The Agent outside.

--Part VII (The Clearing)

Not far from the new river, there spanned a great clearing in the jungle, carpeted with tall grass that grew up to about knee-height. And as she walked into this natural break in the forest, Anya spotted a glint of metal in the distance. And at this, The Director drew her sword.

-

Seeing The Agent's target in the tree line, The Fang signalled for Silas to exit his suit, and to prepare to borrow his sword in a few moments, as Silas, too, had been receiving extensive training with his own subordinate these last 4 weeks. And, he had been learning ever since his first attack on The Epicenter. But, with no sword of his own, The Agent was forced to use The Fang's. But this was no issue, especially when his trap required the use of only one blade at a time.

-

Anya told the others to hold back, while she moved into the clearing to assess the situation. And as she did so, a voice called to her from across the field, uttering only her married name. She adjusted her vision to the dimming sky, only to spy her nemesis, cloaked in the descending veil of night, sword in hand. Anya's face contorted into a vicious glare, as her grip tightened intensely on her weapon. And she responded to his call by running at him. And at her approach, her husband's killer smiled.

-

She violently made contact with The Fang, ruthlessly thrashing him about, as his blocks and parries only fueled her rage. The others were far behind when they realized what was going on. But Lucas, ever faithful to The Director, was determined to obey her orders, and tried to convince the others to do so as well. But Lyra was not about to sit back while Anya fought this monster, alone. Owen concurred, and together, they pursued the dueling pair while Lucas covered them from the trees behind.

-

The swords met each other again and again. All the while, Anya grew angrier, and The Fang grew weaker with every hit from the blue steel sword. His opponent's ruthless swings met his flesh again and again after he was struck enough times in the armor. And, before long, she had him on the ground, and at her mercy. But before she could kill him, a light appeared before her. This distracted Anya's attention just long enough for The Fang to strike her in the stomach, and crawl to safety, as The Agent, without his suit, stepped out of the light, emitted by his hoverplane. And after he called The Fang's sword to his own hand, he walked over to an unstable Anya. But when she tried to strike him, her fatigue set in, and she failed. The

unarmored Agent sidestepped her blade, and effortlessly disarmed her after its point contacted the ground. This brought Anya, physically and mentally, to her knees. And there, she shed a tear. And Silas thrusted his own blade through Anya's body. Just before she died, he whispered violently in her ear, that when she got to hell, to go find her husband, and fuck him for him. And with that, he tore the blade from his victim's torso, and her body tilted forward, blood draining from her mouth, nose, and the gaping incision in her body. She coughed once and collapsed. And Anya died, there in the clearing. However, The Agent was not finished yet.

-

By now, Lyra had seen what had happened, but she was not prepared to see her brother's face. And when she did, her resolve finally broke. Lyra began to cry, but she did not move. Even as Silas approached her with his blood-stained sword. Her cries were then taken over by words. She begged to know how her brother could do what he had done. Silas was unfazed. Lyra continued, saying, through her tears, that for her whole life, she saw Silas as a good person. Then asked him, again, how he could do all of these “horrible things”. Silas finally spoke to Lyra, declaring that it was because it's what he had promised to do. And this he said, as he drew back his sword, and decapitated his sister, and she, too, collapsed and died in that clearing, just in time for Owen to see her dripping head tossed casually aside by his brother.

-

Owen stood there, shocked, but his brother simply turned and left after this. And once Silas was some distance away, Owen ran through the tall grass to his sister's body. Where he cradled it gently, as the hoverplane's light came on once more, and off it took into the night sky. But, all Owen could do now was stare, speechless and with utter contempt, at the brother that he thought he had, leaving the area, after he had only just slaughtered Lyra so callously. And it was only now that Owen Archer realized that his brother was truly gone. And now, he was driven to end him, once and for all.

---Book VIII (The Wrath of Alek)

--Part I (The Last Piece of the Puzzle)

Alek Roger had long despised The Epicenter. Rejected by both The Exoskeleton and by every woman he'd ever come into contact with, he was without any prospects. And he blamed women and society for his own failures. And he simply used The Agent's cause as an excuse to vent his rage. And so, he sought to punish the city he hated, and now he would be granted the opportunity to do so. As The Agent announced that since The Pincers were spread thin, and The Exoskeleton was leaderless, the time had come to truly occupy The Epicenter. And then,

transform the city into an abattoir.

-

The Agent’s strategy was simple. The Fang was to infiltrate the prison, in which he was a former guard. As he knew that facility better than any of The Legion. When there, he was to kill all of the guards and subsequently release all of the prisoners. And this act was to lead into Korum's role. This being to unleash his rage upon the city streets, and to use the freed prisoners as his attack dogs. His task was simply to wipe out as many citizens as possible. However, he was commanded to take William Hunter alive to The Agent, per his strict orders. As Bill was to be used as leverage against the 2 remaining Pincers in the jungle. Korum was otherwise completely free to rain his vengeance down upon anyone that he wished. And finally, it was The Agent's task to assassinate The Chancellor. But this needed to be done before anything else. To decapitate The Epicenter's leadership, and to make impossible any kind of coordinated response. The Fang would then do his part. Followed by Korum.

-

With all the pieces in place, The Agent gathered his compatriots into the hoverplane, and towards their targets did they fly.

--Part II (The Last Tyrant)

Dao stared out of the immense window of his palace, as he had done many months ago. Lost in thought, about The Agent, about The Serpent King, and about what it all could mean for him and the city that he ruled. And as he sat down in his chair, a tear rolled down The Chancellor's cheek. As he heard the opening of the metal suit from behind him. And he knew that he was dead.

-

Silas walked around The Chancellor's desk, and in his hand was The Director's bone dagger, recovered from the new river, in which Gascon had been killed. The Agent wanted to kill Dao with his own hands, and then, to watch him die with his own eyes. Dao spoke to him, and said that knew what he would become, ever since he first took that book from the library all those years ago. *The Wrath of Yig*. He admitted that he’d wanted to kill him then, but he didn't have the excuse ready, until Silas murdered 5 people. But then, he escaped. So, his mother took his place, then told him to imagine that. He concluded with a slight chuckle at the absurdity, staring at the man who was going to kill him. Silas then confessed that he had already imagined that, many times. Every single day in that house, he wanted to kill her. Dao continued, and said that Silas had been small once, and so innocent. Silas interrupted him, claiming that no human is

ever truly innocent, an accusation that included himself. Dao chuckled, and said he supposed Silas was right about innocence in The Epicenter, or the lack of it. Dao also admitted his part in culling that “nonsense” in his rule. But then, he asked what it had all been for in the end. Silas was confused. Dao continued, confessing that Silas had been the one person that he was ever truly afraid of. And everything he had done, he had done to keep them all safe from him. And even now, he didn’t regret a thing. He was only sad to see it all fail. Silas walked around the desk to Dao's chair, and The Chancellor spoke one last time, asking Silas if he was really going to do “it”. Silas asked in return, if “it” meant killing Dao. But Dao followed this by completing Silas’ sentence with the word “everyone”. Silas realized what Dao meant. And he coldly responded by confirming that theory. Dao then guessed that it was because “she” had told him to. Silas shifted slightly. And Dao continued by deducing that Silas was going to pay his king's price. Silas thought for a moment, then said that “she” was right. Dao then asked what “she” had been right about, to which The Agent answered that they've “destroyed” her. And that was a crime that couldn’t go unpunished. Dao said nothing as he leaned back in his chair, and Silas finished saying that he wouldn’t let it. And with that, The Agent of The Serpent King opened Dao's throat with his bone dagger, and The Chancellor's clothes, desk, and chair were all drenched with blood that soon pooled on the floor beneath his chair. The Agent then cleaned his knife and sheathed it. Then, he entered his suit, cloaked himself, and reported to The Fang that The Epicenter had been decapitated. After which, he left Dao in his chair, and closed the door behind him.

--Part III (Hell on Two Legs)

The Fang broke into the prison soon after The Agent reported his success. And the inmates were released into the command of Korum. Tyson then began butchering his former coworkers at the prison compound.

The streets soon become a slaughterhouse as Alek unleashed hell. Though he was instructed to kill everyone, he sought women intently, much to Silas and Tyson's mutual frustration. As The Legion was meant to be indiscriminate in its slaughter, just as in *The Wrath of Yig*. But Korum seemed hellbent on his own retribution, and not on carrying out what was needed by The Legion. As such, Alek was becoming something of a liability. For now though, he remained useful. As long as there people were alive in The Epicenter, Korum was to be kept as such. But secretly, it was mutually agreed, between the 2 leaders, that Korum should be eliminated after he had served his purpose.

Korum led the inmates through the city streets, killing anyone that they came across. Their

leader grabbed any women who had rejected him in the past and tore them in half with his immense strength, discarding their upper halves behind him, and keeping the lower halves as his trophies. He simply had the rest killed. Some he gave to the inmates, who then tortured them to death. Altogether, the elimination of the population took over a week of constant blood lubricating Korum's machinery of wrath. But after a while, Alek had exhausted the homes, emptying them as if he'd been gutting deer. And he was now growing bored. And it was then that he found William Hunter, hiding in a storm drain, near his house. He then decided to take matters into his own hands. And so, against the explicit orders of The Agent, Korum had the inmates cut Bill into pieces while he was still alive. And thereafter, he had the severed head boxed and sent to the jungle headquarters, where he'd guessed that Lucas Hunter and Owen Archer would be staying now. Korum accomplished this via a hoverplane, flown by an inmate that he had mortally wounded, making it a one way trip. He also punctured the gas tank so that it could only go as far as the hole would allow. And thus, it had a very limited range, but was able to reach The Basin. Then, Korum sent the box containing Bill's severed head to its destination. And the inmate bled to death inside the vehicle as it landed on the roof of the headquarters.

In the palace, The Agent had butchered the staff. And in The Exoskeleton headquarters, The Fang had wiped out The Pincers and the recruits, some as young as 15 years old. Yet, neither of them had heard of what Korum had done to Bill. As such, they still waited for him to be delivered alive after they had completed their respective tasks. Soon, The Epicenter was completely stripped of people. Like a vulture picking a carcass clean, every last morsel was taken out, and the city was left a hollow skeleton. With no opposition remaining, The Legion had, at last, conquered The Epicenter. And their side of The Serpent King's bargain had been fulfilled.

However, Silas Archer understood that his mission was not yet complete. And as soon as The Epicenter was depopulated, he began his preparations to complete his true mission. The extermination of the human species.

--Part IV (The Gift)

A week of walking had brought Owen and Lucas back to the jungle headquarters. And they had seen the hoverplane on the roof.

Director Anya Manse had been buried next to her husband, near the first river, where he was killed. And Owen had claimed her sword, since Lucas had expressed his dislike of sword

combat. But Owen was reluctant to take it, as he had wanted to bury it between the dead pair as a tribute to them. But Lucas insisted that she would have wanted it to meet the heart of those who killed her, and her husband. So Owen kept the blade.

But as they arrived at the only place that they knew of that could shelter them, they spied the hoverplane, and Lucas was convinced that it was his brother, who had come to join them. But after they had opened the vehicle, and seen the dead inmate with the box beside him, they both shuttered. And when Lucas opened the lingering container with his trembling hands, he stumbled back in utter shock and panic at the horror of what he'd just found inside. And Owen immediately knew that Lucas had only been halfway correct in his thinking before. William had, in fact, come to join them. And while Lucas wailed in grief, Owen left the room. And in his despair, he looked upward at the crest of The Wall, and wondered if the hoverplane, or anything at all, could ever be fixed.

--Part V (To Reap What is Sown)

When news came to The Agent, concerning Korum's little gift, he was less than amused. Furious, he vented to The Fang, calling Korum an idiot, then intensified his tirade, saying that Alek was a fucking idiot. Tyson spoke up, addressing him as “sir”. Silas furiously asked his second in command what he had to say. Tyson then continued, saying that Alek had otherwise done his job. Silas knew exactly what The Fang was suggesting. He then approved Tyson’s assessment as he calmed down, then ordered for him to bring “that mistake” back to him, in the way he did with Hunter. Tyson sheathed his bloody sword, and went to Korum.

Alek had converted a movie theater into his own personal torture chamber, where his proclivities were being turned upon the inmates previously under his command. But as he was cutting into another one, The Fang came into the room, drew his sword, and, much to Korum's shock, cut his head from his body, showering the dark screen with blood. Then, The Fang slaughtered the rest of the inmates, to tie up any loose ends.

The Agent disposed of Dao's body. And sat in the very chair that the latter was killed in. And as he pondered a solution to his final task, The Fang walked in and dropped Alek Roger's decapitated head onto the desk in front of him. And The Agent repaid his ally with a smile. As for the rest of him, Alek's body was fed to the local stray dog population, as many of their previous owners had been killed, so were allowed to roam the streets, free to consume the slew of

corpses that now flooded them, congesting the sewers and alleys. And among them was Alek's headless body, discarded among the graves of his own victims. And back at the palace, his head was placed on a spike outside the prison, as a symbol of The Legion's conquest. A bloody trophy to mark the occasion, and the place from which Silas had escaped and led The Legion to victory.

Meanwhile, Lucas Hunter buried his brother's severed head outside the jungle headquarters, never again opening the box as he did so. But after this was done, Owen called him inside. As they now needed to figure out what to do next. To which, Lucas had only one answer, that they were going to kill Owen’s brother. Owen thought for a moment. Then, he swallowed hard, and agreed.

---Book IX (The Wrath of Lucas)

--Part I (The Grave of the Truth)

Alek's gift had not only gotten him killed, but it had also given Owen and Lucas a way to get back to The Epicenter. But this was not the first of priorities for The Agent, for he had a far greater task upon which to place his focus. How was he to wipe out humanity, while leaving the rest of the world untouched? But then, he finally realized, the answer lay in his own suit. And he soon began work on an immense device in the palace. And this device was to be given his own power. Using the lab previously occupied by Anya Manse to create blue steel, Silas found himself a formula to work from. But he now needed to implement it properly, and he knew that this process could take weeks.

Meanwhile, The Fang settled down in his old Beauregard home, miraculously left intact, despite Alek's rampage. But he soon found himself troubled by his curiosity and boredom once again. Something that he hadn't felt since he first spoke with Silas in prison. And with this new affliction of discontent, Tyson gathered his weapon and headed across the empty city to The Pincer Headquarters, where the records of each citizen were kept, including their death certificates. And a while after looking through the files, he found the old archives of The ESS. And among those death certificates, was that of one particular ESS detective.

--Part II (The Hoverplane)

In The Basin, Lucas and Owen were in the process of repairing the hoverplane, left by Korum. As it was largely undamaged, save for the punctured fuel tank. A wound that was easily patched. The real question between the 2 Pincers was how “worth it” killing The Agent really was. As Owen was unsure if Lucas could even pull it off, as all who had tried, thus far, had failed. And he wanted not to lose the last person in the world that he cared for. Add to that, all evidence pointed to the fact that The Agent had finally conquered The Epicenter. So why bother going back, when there was likely no one left to help? But Lucas was unmovable, and determined to kill Silas, as was Owen, despite this potentially being a lost cause. However, they had no idea that The Agent was not yet finished. And while they repaired the hoverplane, The Fang confronted The Agent, regarding the death of Elise Barnfeld.

--Part III (The Ghost of Betrayal)

A folder was dropped on the desk of the former Chancellor, much to The Agent's confusion. With indifference, he inquired what he wanted. Tyson responded by stating the name of Elise Barnfeld. Silas raised an eyebrow. Tyson continued, revealing that he now knew that he had killed her in the prison break, and asked him if he remembered. Silas rolled his eyes, then admitted to the deed, but claimed that the detective was bleeding to death, making her a liability, thereby forcing him to end her suffering. Tyson shook his head, telling Silas that he’d lied to him, and he now wanted to know why. Silas cracked his neck, then he spoke, saying that he needed to be sure that he could be counted on. And for that to happen, he couldn't know. Tyson sighed. His questions then turned elsewhere, asking The Agent why he was still working. Silas furrowed his brow, and asked him what he was talking about. Tyson answered, accusing him of experimenting, demanding to know what it was that he was working on. Silas said nothing. And Tyson declared that if he wouldn’t tell him, then he would find out for himself. Tyson then left the room. And Silas smirked to himself, as Tyson would find out the truth. And, in so doing, he would bring about his own destruction.

Tyson then went in search of a copy of *The Wrath of Yig*. But there were only a few copies left. As Silas' original copy had been destroyed by his future victims, and he likely now had the one read by Anya Manse in her own research. However, there was one place where a massive collection of books resided, the second largest in The Epicenter. But Tyson had been banned from it for most of his life.

-

The Beauregard family library had been the result of the accumulation of generations of knowledge. But only the senior Beauregards were permitted within its shelves. Now however, with no people left in the city, Tyson could gain access to them. And in his search, he found the last copy of the book he'd been looking for. Tyson opened its pages, and read them with increasing dread.

--Part IV (The Pages of Truth)

Tyson read.

After my extensive butcherings of the Texas Boys, I gradually learned of Yig's true intentions. As the graves I continued to fill became acres of death, never could I cease, not while Texas Boys persisted in their own disregard of Yig's children. And subsequent killing of them with impunity.

Tyson kept reading.

So I needed another way. I needed to contact The Father of Serpents, himself. I prayed to my master, my king, for an answer to this ouroboros of slaughter. To which, the answer became clear to me, as Yig's words were spoken through his children's flickering tongues.

-

The wheel of violence will only be stopped, if one side of the conflict is completely annihilated. The Texas Boys, or The Children of Yig. Humanity, or everything else. And so, I came to realize that a world without man would please The Father of Serpents. The Serpent King. And to save the world from my own species would be the greatest thing I could ever do. To make peace with Yig, and in so doing, I could secure my own. And so, I would end the cycle, by ending those that forced it to perpetuate its destructive spin.

Tyson closed the book. And then shed a tear, as he slumped back in his chair. And for 20 full minutes, he held his head in his hands. As he now understood the true gravity of what was at stake.

--Part V (Operational)

Back in The Basin, Lucas and Owen had fully repaired the hoverplane, and were now preparing to fly to The Epicenter.

Meanwhile, in The Epicenter, The Agent had fully constructed a device, a weapon capable of wiping out an entire species, while leaving all others unaffected, using the power of his own suit. This was possible due to a feature that targeted the DNA of the population to be affected. As Silas had used Wipeout in its makeup, the chemical used by The Epicenter to target the DNA of “pests”. However, the destruction it would unleash would kill anything that was not omitted from the list of targets that was inputted into the device. So, when it came to input humans, Silas omitted his own DNA sequence. But to cover himself further, he also omitted any similar DNA sequences from the list of targets. But this would be the greatest mistake that Silas Archer would ever make. Nevertheless, the device was completed. And it was dubbed “The Spear” by Silas.

-

However, Tyson took notice. And when he apologized to The Agent for his outburst, and subsequently inquired about the new machine. Silas briefed him, and apologized, in turn, for lying to him. He told Tyson that The Spear was necessary to cement their victory, making a point of showing him how to stop it, should the situation call. This was to be done by pressing a large button on the right-hand flank of the machine.

-

The apparatus looked like a large single loop, with a high platform on the bottom, that served to close the circle. And into this loop, his metal reptilian suit would be secured. When there, the device would be activated. And since The Serpent King resided within it, her power would do the rest. Effectively, Silas had given The King a gift of his own. But it needed to be activated before she could use it properly. And she was limited to the DNA targets inputted by Silas. She could not target any humans who were not on the list. But this she knew well, and she was now able to channel her personal destructive power across the entire planet, thanks to The Spear, so named because it increased The King's reach of damage. And could pinpoint, and eliminate, its precise targets with 100% accuracy, all while she retained direct control of her new lance. Silas said that the activation switch was located above the button that stopped the device. And this was made explicitly clear to The Fang, who took careful note. As he intended to stop the machine once the suit was affixed inside its frame and Silas stepped outside his armor. But as the 2 discussed their strategy, the sound of a hoverplane landing outside prompted The Agent to cloak himself, haul The Spear onto his back, and carry it to his own hoverplane. Before he left the room with his weapon, The Agent commanded The Fang to meet him at the agreed upon

location. Far from The Epicenter and deep in The Basin. A location chosen by The Serpent King, herself.

--Part VI (The Price of Entry)

Lucas and Owen broke into the palace soon after The Spear was secured in The Agent's hoverplane. He then returned to the palace, still cloaked within his metal suit and scanning the area for who he knew would be there. But as the pair could not see him, they were forced to walk the empty halls without any ability to target Silas. But Lucas was consumed by rage. He wanted The Agent dead. And despite Owen second guessing his strategy, Lucas refused to listen to him. It was then that The Fang jumped them, having been ordered to take them both out by Silas. And Tyson needed to keep up appearances as long as he could, at least until The Agent had left. As Owen drew the blue steel sword and dueled The Fang, Lucas separated himself from them and continued to stalk the palace for his quarry. Only then, did he realize his vulnerable position. But this came too late for him to escape. As The Agent impaled Lucas from behind with his spiked metal tail. Lucas lost his life within moments, and his bloody body was thrown to the floor with aggression as The Agent swiftly left the palace and boarded his hoverplane, per The King's request. As Owen Archer remained the only opposition left for them, and they should simply leave him to his fate. The Agent then climbed aboard the hoverplane, with The Spear, and took off to its final destination.

--Part VII (The Loss of the Last)

Tyson disengaged Owen as soon as he heard The Agent's hoverplane leave. But with Owen's refusal to stop attacking him, Tyson was forced to escape, and he soon left for Owen's hoverplane. He was chased by him the whole way there, but his opponent could not apprehend him. And so, Owen was forced to watch The Fang escape, once again. Owen then turned his attention back to Lucas, whom he soon found on the carpeted floor of the main hall, drenched in his own blood, and refusing to breathe.

---Book X (The Wrath of The Serpent King)

--Part I (The Platform)

Silas arrived at the agreed upon location. It was another ancient platform in a clearing in the jungle. It was a large stone table, with a stone staircase running down to the jungle floor below from a large opening on the surface. Under the table was a series of columns that supported it. Silas landed the hoverplane on the far side of the table from the stairs. He then transported The Spear from the vehicle to the platform, and placed it further away from the stairs, on the other side of the hoverplane. He then pushed the vehicle off of the table and into the jungle, and then prepared The Spear for his final action.

--Part II (The Death of The Fang)

Owen broke down in tears after he buried Lucas outside the chancellery. He had finally let the weight of his grief wash over him, as if the blood of his brother's victims was unleashed upon his back. It was then that Tyson appeared behind him. Though Owen no longer cared enough about this to be afraid, telling The Fang that whatever it is that he was going to do, just make it quick. He didn't care anymore. Tyson then knelt down to him and tossed his sword to the ground. Then he asked him if he cared about the human species. And Owen turned his head.

Owen began by demanding to have a reason for how he was supposed to believe The Fang. Reminding Tyson that he had killed Anya's husband, his former coworkers, and helped Silas kill countless other people. So how would he know that this wasn't a trap? Tyson responded that he had nothing to gain from lying to him now, and he had nothing to lose by telling Owen the truth. He then revealed that Silas was going to wipe out humanity. Owen's face grew pale. He then asked with shock in his voice what he was talking about. Tyson answered that The Serpent King was the deity that gave Silas his power, but revealed that she didn't give it away for free. There was a price that she demanded. And humanity was that price. Owen was in disbelief, saying that he didn't understand. And asked why this, Serpent King, would want them all dead. Tyson shook his head, and said that he didn't know, and that he had only learned about her a few hours ago. Again, Owen asked him what he meant. Tyson spoke, and said that the book that his brother liked so much, *The Wrath of Yig*, explained everything. Owen shook his head, and said that even if he believed any of this, why would he want to stop Silas? Tyson shot at him, yelling that he had never signed on to kill everyone in the world. Owen thought for a moment. Then he knowingly surmised that Silas had never thought to tell him. Tyson sighed, but said nothing. Owen then looked at his former enemy and finally realized his sincerity. Then, Owen asked

Tyson Beauregard where Silas was.

--Part III (Brutus and Cassius)

The new pair boarded the plane, flown there by Lucas, and as they took off, Tyson further explained The Spear and The Serpent King. Though initially somewhat skeptical, Owen eventually grew to understand them better. Given all that he had seen thus far, nothing surprised him anymore.

At The Platform, Silas attached the suit to The Spear. And once he exited it, he primed his great weapon. And soon, it became active. Now all it took was one final piece. And as the sound of a hoverplane crossed his airwaves, The Agent gave himself a fiendish grin. He then turned toward it as it landed. And out stepped Tyson Beauregard. Silas commented that he was late. But Tyson rebutted, confirming that he was as Owen Archer emerged from behind him, yelling his brother’s name. Silas quickly put together what was happening. He laughed a little, before asking Tyson if Owen had “turned him”, calling his former ally pathetic. Then he goaded him, daring him to stop The Spear, and saying that he knew how to do it. He then called Tyson's sword from its sheath to his own hand as he asked him this. And in response, Owen drew his blue steel blade. Though Tyson was left unarmed, he still had The Serpent King's gift, and so, could face The Agent. Owen tried one last time to reach out to his brother, pleading that he didn’t want to hurt him. He begged him to “come home”. But The Agent flinched not. And Owen begged him not to do it. Silas then said that he didn't have a choice, that he’d made a promise. And with these words, The Agent of The Serpent King attacked.

--Part IV (The Duel of the Archers)

The enemy blades connected with enough force to overwhelm the sound of The Spear, behind Silas. And as the brothers fought, Tyson made his way to the weapon. But when Silas saw this, he quickly disengaged Owen and impaled Tyson through the back and lifted his mangled body over his head on his sword with just one arm. He then threw his former ally to the stone beneath him, letting gravity pull Tyson from his blade. Then, he resumed attacking Owen. But Tyson moved still. And he began to crawl his way towards The Spear, blood trailing behind him.

Owen and Silas battled across The Platform, their swords moving faster and faster as they both

failed to outmatch each other. But Silas was eventually bested, as his sword was forced from his hand. But, he drew his bone knife and drove it into Owen's hand, forcing him to drop his own sword. Owen then pulled the knife free of Silas' grip, curled his fingers inward, and struck Silas with his own knife, embedded in his hand, managing to cut his face. But with blood dripping from his cheek, Silas only smiled chillingly at Owen, then asked him if all of “that was worth inflicting such a minor injury. He then grabbed Owen's hand and tore from it the bone knife, and subsequently thrust it into his shoulder, twisted it, and ripped it down his chest. Owen then pushed Silas away, but endured pain as the blade left his body. And the blood began to seep into his shirt. Silas then ran into Owen at full speed. And this impact forced more blood to expel itself from the vicious cut left by Silas' knife, and Owen staggered backwards in pain. But after Silas sheathed the knife, he kept on hitting his brother. Again and again, he hit him. But Owen then shoved Silas to the ground, picked up both swords, and began to slash at his brother. Silas retreated to the open staircase, on the far side of The Platform. But while Owen slashed at him, Silas dodged his strikes, though he did suffer a few cuts from these. Nevertheless, Silas managed to outmaneuver Owen, forcefully grabbing his wrist. He wrenched the blue steel from his hand, and brought it into his own. Silas then fought Owen to the edge of the staircase, then kicked him down. And as he tumbled down the stone steps, Silas sauntered after him. Owen then fell to the bottom, losing Silas' sword in the process. He also broke his ribs on one side. And once Silas came to him, The Agent struck his brother in this injury, repeatedly. But Owen managed to recover the sword. And with it, he stabbed Silas in the side. But The Agent still stood firm, and pulled the sword from his body. He now had both. But Owen rolled away from him, and with this move, he managed to pull the bone knife from Silas' belt, and kicked him in the stomach as he got away. Silas stumbled, then Owen rushed him with the knife and carved into his wrist, forcing Silas to drop the blue steel sword. But after Owen had recovered it, Silas threw himself into him, sending him into the stone wall, where Silas dragged his own sword through the rocks, in an attempt to decapitate his brother, sending sparks in all directions. But Owen outmaneuvered his opponent, then cut into Silas' body with the bone knife. Then, he cut into his right arm with the blue steel sword, severing his forelimb from his torso. Silas screamed in pain. And Owen saw his chance.

By now, Tyson reached The Spear, and was attempting to press the button that, he was told, would deactivate it.

Beneath him, the brothers continued their duel. But Silas was suffering slash after slash, and he was soon taken to the jungle floor. But Owen didn't stop, not until Silas dropped his sword. Then, after retrieving it, Owen pinned Silas to the ground with the blue steel blade, slipped the other sword through his severed stump, then put the bone knife to Silas' throat. Only when his opponent was immobilized, did Owen begin to speak.

--Part V (Victory)

He shouted into his face, the question “why”. But Silas said nothing. Owen then repeated himself, but Silas just smiled and laughed. Owen was disgusted, and said that he couldn't believe him. He just couldn’t believe that Silas would do something like this. Silas then spoke, asking Owen what it was called when someone could look down the barrel of a gun, and smile, as he looked at the knife against his neck. Owen was confused. But then, Silas answered his own question with one word, victory.

Tyson then reached the button. And was about to press it.

Owen twisted the blue steel sword, and asked Silas, intently, what he was talking about. Silas smiled viciously, then he declared that the “thing” about humanity was that, in the end, it always destroyed itself, adding that he had known, all along, that Tyson would eventually betray him. Owen's stomach dropped inside his body as he heard his brother's words. He then thought that if Silas had known that Tyson would betray him, then why would he tell him how to turn off The Spear?

-

Then it hit him. It hit him like a truck. Tyson wasn't going to turn it off, the button was actually the trigger for The Spear, the one that Silas had told him to press. Owen panicked as his brother cackled like a hyena, beneath him. The former then attempted to run up the stairs to warn Tyson, only for Silas to tear his left hand from the blue steel blade and grab Owen's ankle as he ran, causing him to fall to the ground, breaking his nose on the stone step. Owen then looked up, his eyes expelling tears through the blood.

Tyson then managed to press the button that activated The Spear. And The Serpent King unleashed her wrath.

--Part VI (Powersnake)

Tyson then immediately died, followed by the rest of the human species, all within a few moments. They were all woundless, but they were hollowed, and their eyes were gone. They

were left as husks, with their organs stripped, leaving only their skin and bones intact. Their mouths hung agape, but they retained no teeth. Their jaws locked into screams, but these were silent. Humanity died silent.

All except 2. One of whom was The Agent, who had pulled himself free from the swords and limped into the jungle until he found himself a great log and fell against it, gazing upon his king, who had appeared to him one last time. She spoke to him sweetly, thanking him for “freeing” her. Silas smiled warmly, but was too weak to say anything. The Serpent King then said one last thing to her only friend, confessing that she would always love him. She had “always” loved him, as he had “always” loved her. Then she left, disappearing into the air. But Silas wondered what she had meant by "always".

-

Then, the now unmanned satellites fell to Earth, creating an artificial meteor shower, in the wake of humanity's destruction.

-

And Silas saw this too. Just before he closed his eyes and fell asleep, for the very last time.

---Book XI (Ouroboros)

--Part I (The Last Humans)

Long before The Epicenter existed, humanity had been infecting other places. And in this instance, they had infected Mars. But one day, contact with Earth abruptly ceased. And the colony began to consider its options. The leader of the martian colony was a man named Alexander Gagarin, descendant of the first man into space, the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin. And it was his family, on Earth, that he'd wanted to contact for 8 years. But when contact was cut off, and the colonial technicians were adamant that the devices were fully operational and undamaged, Gagarin naturally grew concerned about his wife and daughter, and decided to call an emergency meeting of the entire colony.

The martian colony was small, only around 8 people, in total. They had been tasked with setting up the living quarters and facilities for the true colonists, all of whom still resided on Earth. But

contact with them, too, had been lost. It was as though they had simply abandoned the facilities on Earth. And this appeared, to the colony, to be taking place everywhere, as they could not reach any satellites, space stations, or even telescopes. It was as though they had simply ceased to exist.

Gagarin gathered the crew. Then, he cleared his throat, and began to speak, addressing those who may or may not have known, announcing that they had, unfortunately, lost contact with Earth. entirely. He then added that the technicians, Jackie and Adrian, had informed him that their equipment was in complete working order. So, it was either a global power issue, suggesting a possible solar flare or something like that, paused, then said with a swallow, that there was possibly something far worse going on. The crew looked around at one another. And Gagarin declared that in lieu of remote contact, the crew would be making direct contact. As in, they would be departing their colony there and going back to Earth. The quartermaster, Jorgin, spoke up, adding that it was also important to know that because of this new dead spot, they had no way of knowing, for certain, if their supply of resources from Earth would even arrive.

The colony was not yet self-sufficient, and needed regular drops of supplies from Earth to keep the workers alive. And now, there was no way to verify that these supplies would be delivered at all. Given the circumstances, and the fact that they had enough food for now to make the trip back to Earth if they left immediately, the colony would need to ship out in the next few hours. Not to mention, the families of the colonists having potentially disappeared without a trace.

So, they collectively agreed to pack the shuttle with as much food as would be necessary for the trip back. And 3 hours later, the shuttle took off from the Martian surface, leaving the facilities there, forever. Yet, little did they know that there was only one human left alive, a deeply broken man.

--Part II (The Lonely Archer)

Owen had long since learned of The Spear's DNA targeting system. And how Silas, in his assurance that he would not become a victim of his own weapon, omitted his sequence, and any similar ones, from its list of targets. As a result, Owen Archer's DNA sequence had been omitted as well, since his own was similar enough to his brother's for it to slip through the net. But this, he only figured out recently. As he had been otherwise occupied with 2 things. Finding Silas, and experimenting with The Spear. As he knew that Silas had survived, and was now

hiding somewhere in the jungle. Owen also wanted to alter The Spear, to perhaps find out how to bring everyone back. And in accordance with this contradiction of intended purpose, Owen thought back to Anya Manse's experiments with blue steel. And he hit upon a possible answer. According to her notes, recovered from The Epicenter, Anya had previously tested blue steel against Wipeout. But the results of this were only vaguely addressed here, as though she'd wanted to hide them. As if she'd been afraid. Nevertheless, Owen wanted to test this again. As, in his grief-addled mind, the fact that the two swords had opposed each other, had meant that Silas' handiwork could somehow be undone. But deep down, he understood that this was impossible. And he simply busied himself with the only other thing that he could do. Though, he did combine a molten sliver of the blue steel sword with The Spear's makeup, turning the weapon into a tool that a human could use, rather than just a serpent god.

But when a space shuttle landed some distance away from him, he thought it simply another wreck, falling back to Earth. Then, he continued in his only fruitful pursuit, and sheathed his opposing swords.

--Part III (Homecoming)

The shuttle opened with the 8 colonists in disbelief, as the entire launch site was abandoned. And on the way down, there were no satellites anywhere in Earth's orbit. This perplexed them so much that they landed in the first place that they could think of. The Barrens, just beyond The Epicenter. Though they came not from this city, they certainly knew of it. But they had heard nothing of its destruction, or of anything that had recently transpired. Then, they found the bodies. They were rotten and pungent, and the odor of decay permeated the area. They were piled like putrid sacks of flour in alleyways, houses, and were being devoured by crows. The colonists were horrified. And Gagarin's guts were particularly twisted, because he gradually came to understand what probably happened to his family.

-

This was later confirmed, when the colonists met Owen Archer.

--Part IV (The Archer's Alterations)

Gagarin broke down when he heard what had happened, as Owen had explained everything. He'd actually come to The Barrens to find Silas, when he realized that he was no longer alone

on this planet. He told the colonists of his brother, of The Serpent King, and of humanity's extinction. But then, he let slip that The Spear had been altered, and that it could possibly be used to bring everyone back to life. And at this, Gagarin looked up at him. However, what Owen said next didn't seem to faze the grieving man, who had now been given the opportunity to resurrect all whom he had lost. Owen explained that the problem was that The Spear didn't seem to react well to anything he had tried to do with it. It just seemed to fight back. It's as if it didn't want him to change what had happened. Gagarin spoke, asking if it had a mind of its own, or something of that ilk. Owen responded that he'd seen enough by now that he was not surprised by anything anymore. Gagarin then asked if he could try his hand at The Spear, but Owen recoiled at that idea, aggressively refusing this proposal, saying that had no idea what that would lead to, and neither did Gagarin. The astronaut went silent, then relented, but asked where The Spear was, anyway. And Owen reluctantly took them to The Platform, in his hoverplane.

--Part V (The Resting Serpent)

Owen took off into the jungle after they arrived. But before he left, he commanded Alexander not to touch anything and informed him that he was going to try to find his brother again. Then, he left for the western quarter, a part of The Basin that he'd seldom searched before now. He then muttered to himself that maybe this time he would succeed.

After a full day of walking, Owen finally found who he had been looking for, but The Agent wasn't moving, though this did nothing to quell Owen's rage. He drew both swords and charged at Silas, who was still leaning against the great log. But it was not until Owen came up from behind and put his blades through his chest, that the truth became apparent. The Agent of The Serpent King had died in his sleep long ago, and the blades had merely passed through his bones. Owen nervously made his way around the log to see his brother's face, which had been reduced to a grinning skull. And at this sight, Owen cried out at The Agent's body, screaming with a quivering lip and tears streaming from his eyes, pleading with the dark, hollow eyes to know why he did it, why he killed Lyra and the rest of mankind. Then he slipped a confession of hatred. He said that he hated him, and started back as he did. Then, his mind collapsed altogether. Owen screamed that he hated him, again and again, all the while, throttling Silas' skeleton, slashing at the skull with his swords, and crying uncontrollably. Finally, his throat grew sore, and he could cry no longer. He was exhausted. Panting, Owen tossed the swords aside, and asked one last question to the skeleton of Silas Archer, why did he hate them all so much? Alas, his brother responded to Owen's question with silence, as he'd always done. Owen left in complete shambles, having been frozen out by his brother, for the very last time. He had also been robbed of his, and humanity's, revenge. Then, as he was walking back to The Platform, he noticed that The Spear had been activated. And with white-hot anger that now had nowhere to displace itself, he rushed toward the weapon, knowing full well who it most likely was who defied his strict

instructions not to touch it.

--Part VI (Misguided Grief)

Owen had managed to reach The Platform as Gagarin began to pilot The Spear. And Owen, who had already been emotionally devastated, was furious. Just before Owen climbed the stone staircase to the surface, he noticed the bodies of all 7 colonists, their throats slashed with a standard-issue utility knife, used by astronauts, a blade that had been painted with their blood, and was laying on the ground nearby. Owen then realized that Gagarin had killed them all to prevent them from stopping him. When Owen reached The Spear, he began to pound his fists upon the metal suit, within which Gagarin was now attempting to resurrect his family, using the altered technology that had killed them.

Inside, Gagarin tried to communicate with the interface, but it would not obey him. In fact, it fought against his every command. Eventually though, The Spear did activate, but it still refused to resurrect anyone, as this task contradicted its prime directive. Gagarin then tried to force it, demanding The Spear to bring back his family. Still, The Spear refused. Finally though, it seemed to become agitated with Gagarin's commands. And it did do something. However, it was never going to betray its prime directive to wipe out humanity. So it decided to do something else. Something that would fulfill Gagarin's commands, while remaining true to its programming. And in so doing, it would fulfill its own prime directive, again and again, ad infinitum. With its alterations, courtesy of blue steel, and Owen Archer's experimentation, it could do all that it needed to do. It could make reality its slave by distorting its own programming. To make time and space bend and break, to achieve 2 goals at once. To obey 2 different masters, with opposing objectives. And in this polarization, The Spear broke the rules of reality. And soon, reality meant nothing to it.

Owen continued to pound at The Spear from the outside, screaming at Gagarin to exit the suit, when The Spear unleashed another wave of destruction. And Owen's vision was overwhelmed with a white light, and he fell unconscious.

--Part VII (Somewhere Else)

Owen awoke in a room that he did not recognize, and on a bed that he was unfamiliar with. And

upon his arousal, and his subsequent stumbling toward a large mirror to his left, he saw the face of a man that he did not know. He then realized that he had no memories at all. The Spear had done its job. But it had also warped reality and time, to both of its masters' ends.

---Book XII (Bohemian Grove)

--Part I (The Riders)

Owen had no memory of what had happened, or even who he, himself, was. And as he was observing himself in the mirror, the sound of engines came from outside the small wooden room. Owen then staggered to the wooden doorframe, shielding his unprepared eyes from the intense brightness, outside. Eventually, his vision adjusted. But when it did, there was a gang of men before him, astride a fleet of silver motorcycles. And alongside their metal steeds, bayed The Rider's hounds, dogs trained to kill and eat those that they disliked. But when Owen saw these Riders shouting at him, there appeared sudden flashes in his mind, images that he did not remember. Images of Silas, The Spear, and of humanity's end. All of these triggered, in Owen, a feeling of dread and hopelessness, that he did not understand in his amnesia. And with this lack of understanding came fear, which led, in turn, to anger, and then, violence. And the threats he perceived from The Riders were enough to catalyze a rush of intense emotion, which then triggered Owen to act violently towards those he now feared, or in response to scenes that distressed him. All of this sent him into a rage. Wherein, he charged one of The Riders, dragged him from his mount, then pulled the helmet from his head. At which point, he brought it down upon its former wearer, and this he kept on doing until The Rider was twitching on the stony ground and his black helmet was covered in blood. And it was only then when Owen's mind began to calm. Another Rider studied him for a bit before extending his hand to Owen in a truce, and remarked that it was "impressive". Owen was still breathing heavily. The Rider continued, asking him if he had a name. Owen stood up from his kill, then searched his mind for his name, but came up empty, saying that he didn't remember. He didn't remember anything. The Rider shrugged and asked him what they were supposed to call him. Owen thought for a moment, then, he looked down at the man he'd just killed and inquired about his name. The Rider smiled, and said that his name was Bohemian. Owen then nodded, and said that was who he was to be called. The Rider looked around at his approving compatriots, then he declared his acceptance of the new Rider and gestured to the recently forfeited motorcycle, telling him to hop on his bike. Bohemian then donned his predecessor's helmet like a dark bloodsoaked crown. Then, he mounted his bike, and with the others, he sped off into The Barrens. A flat stony valley flanked by 2 great mountain ranges.

-

And when The Riders had left, a vulture came down from one of these, like a dark angel to claim

the dead. And began to feast upon the recently fallen Rider.

--Part II (Tara)

Further up the valley, there stood a small wooden shack, known to the locals as The Outpost. This place functioned as a general store and customs facility, of sorts. Staffed by one young woman known only as Tara, who had a habit of gouging people who wanted entry into The Settlement, this being a large community of destitute people, tucked between the crux of the twin mountain ranges that formed a distinctive "V" shape where the ranges met one another. This made for a natural defense system that protected The Settlement, but also had the opposing effect of trapping its inhabitants within its shape, essentially acting as a fence, with the only opening facing The Wall, then The Basin, beyond that. All of this meant that it was a very closed off community, occasionally extorted by Tara, and tormented by The Riders. All the while, because of the rocky terrain, burial of the dead was impossible. So the corpses were either fed to the dogs that ran alongside The Rider’s motorcycles, or were taken by the dark angels of death that inhabited the mountains surrounding them, as these vultures claimed ultimate dominion over all corpses.

Despite appearances though, Tara was not malicious, as her extortion habits stemmed from necessity rather than an ill will. She had always wanted to help the people of The Settlement, to make their lives better. But when The Riders formed a few years ago, they targeted her first, since her outpost was so isolated. So to avoid becoming their victim, she struck a deal with them instead. To make herself useful, she paid The Riders off with food and water, as this was hard to come by in the valley. But in order to fulfill their demands, Tara needed to acquire the food from the only place that could provide it. The Settlement. The only alternative was for The Riders to have their way with her, then pillage The Settlement for what they needed. Tara had effectively made herself the buffer between them and the people that she wanted to help. The Riders, in turn, vowed not to harm her. However, this deal was strictly honor based. And all it would take to upset this delicate balancing act would be for someone to make a mistake.

--Part III (Tara the Killer)

The Riders arrived at The Outpost soon after they inducted Bohemian. Tara saw them arrive and gathered her payment, but she was confused when she saw the new Rider, and asked who the “new guy” was. Bohemian spoke, giving her his name. Tara raised an eyebrow, and questioned where the “old one” was. Bohemian answered, while the other Riders snickered, that

he was dead, and that he'd taken his name, and his bike. Tara became unsettled at this, asking if that "custom" was part of "their little bike cult" when they came. Bohemian responded that he had just introduced it. Tara stepped back slightly, and everyone present could tell that she was very nervous. Nonetheless, she gave The Riders their pay, and told them that they could go. But one Rider, who had been long frustrated with Tara's denying his many advances, took it upon himself to follow her inside.

She wanted nothing to do with him, but he would not stop. So when his aggression grew, she ducked behind a doorway and pulled out a shotgun. And when The Rider grabbed the gun barrel, Tara pulled the trigger. And his head suddenly coated the wooden walls.

The others had heard the gunshot, and now rushed inside. Tara knew that the balance that she had created had been broken, and that she now had to escape. As she also owned a motorcycle, she dropped the gun, bolted out the back door, and straddled her bike. Then tore off towards The Settlement.

The Riders had seen her escape The Outpost, and by now, they had seen her handiwork. And they were unhappy, to say the least. But Bohemian was particularly affected by the bloody scene. And soon, the images of his own life began to flash within his mind, now with ever more intensity. Bohemian saw Silas kill his sister, but he knew them not. He saw his brother kill Lucas Hunter in the palace, but he knew them not. And he saw Alexander Gagarin's victims, but he still knew them not. Bohemian's trauma then flooded through his veins like a noxious venom, and he now sought revenge against the only person that he recognized. And after a prolonged lucid spell, Bohemian picked up the discarded shotgun, and killed 2 of The Riders. After which, he raised the weapon over his head, and declared himself their new leader, then stated that he would kill anyone who did not concede to his will. And after seeing all that he had done thus far, the other Riders obeyed Bohemian's demands, who then ordered them to mount their bikes. And they took off after Tara.

--Part IV (The Settlement)

Tara had abandoned her bike outside the town. When there, she got herself a black blanket, to hide from The Riders. Then, ducked into one of the many small wooden shacks that clustered the area.

The Settlement was a large group of close-set wooden houses. And the people there were poor and miserable. And Tara’s desire to help them was largely due to the influence of her friend, Anji, who lived towards the center of The Settlement. So, there she went. But not far away, Bohemian and The Riders had lost her in the crowd, and now headed to the large grove of trees, near to the southwest of The Settlement.

--Part V (The Grove)

Bohemian immediately declared this place to be his kingdom, from where he would exact his toll of revenge upon The Settlement. Any Riders with reservations were immediately killed by Bohemian. And this he did by feeding them alive to their own dogs. He then set about gathering the people of The Settlement, one by one, and throwing them to the dogs. All to draw Tara out. Once she was within his grasp, he would torture her, ans subsequently kill her. He sent the remaining Riders to The Settlement to conduct his strategy. Meanwhile, he would remain in his Grove, tending to his new weapons, who were now starving for human flesh.

--Part VI (Tara the Selfless)

While Bohemian festered in his own storm, he spoiled his dogs. But no one seemed to know where Tara had gone. And she still had yet to show herself.

She was, in fact, staying with Anji, who would always command her to hide when she heard The Riders come looking in the area. And as they did not know her, Anji used to feel comparatively safe from them. But as Bohemian grew increasingly more unstable, he had become completely indiscriminate, and was soon killing over 20 people a week, just to find his prize. Eventually though, the suffering became too much. And Tara shed her cloak, and turned herself over to The Riders, against Anji's protests. Tara had insisted that if she did not do this, they would eventually come for her friend too. And she would not let that happen. And so, Tara surrendered to The Riders, who took her back to Bohemian Grove and spared The Settlement from further casualties.

--Part VII (Face-Off)

Tara endured a long 2 hours of torture at the hands of Bohemian, who had been so badly affected by his visions that he was erratic, to the point where he had killed all of the remaining Riders in those 2 hours he had her in his grove. However, with his behavior so disorganized, and his mind so distracted by his traumatic visions, Tara was able to free herself from his grip and run for one of the dead Riders' weapons, laying nearby. But upon drawing the small sword to face him with, Bohemian saw the gleaming weapon, and broke down. He screamed out a name that he did not know, but that he had heard himself utter in his twisted visions. He yelled with tears in his eyes for “Silas” to torment him no more, begging him to let him go, as if he was possessed by some malevolent ghost, then Bohemian began begging Silas to let him die. Tara then acceded to his wish. And as she cut open his stomach, to make their job easier, his dogs saw his weakness, and raced from their confines to devour him alive. But then, Tara collapsed from her injuries, as the man who had inflicted them flailed and died behind her.

-

Anji then appeared in the treeline, having followed The Riders back to The Grove in an attempt to rescue her friend. But apparently, Tara had managed it already, though she had been critically injured by Bohemian, and her breathing was now very shallow. And when she held Tara's hand, they both exchanged knowing looks, Knowing that Tara would die. In mere moments, the light left her eyes, and her body went limp. Anji cried for her friend, but soon, she decided that the people of The Settlement should see the woman who had saved their lives. So, she lifted Tara's body, and brought it back to The Settlement. Where, after Anji's explanation, they declared Tara a hero, and vowed to make her wish come true. And so, they began the construction of The Epicenter.

--Epilogue (Part I)

Bohemian Grove was cut down and replaced with a statue of Tara, driving the rare trees to extinction. All to erase the memory of a man that they decided should never be remembered. They then began using the stone from the mountains as building materials, killing any vultures in their path. As the people viewed them as "dirty birds”, who ate their corpses, and so they wiped them out. The people then began to cremate their dead instead, as it was viewed more tastefully than feeding the birds ever did. They soon flattened the entire mountain range. And the last ever vulture was caged and shot shortly after for fun by a bored zookeeper. This young man was given nothing more than a light fine for ending the life of the last vulture that humanity would ever see.

The Settlement was soon rebranded “The Epicenter”, "The shining city on a hill", the center of the world, from which all human achievement would spread. All in Tara's name.

--Epilogue (Part II)

However, one entity viewed these proceedings with horror. One who had seen the vulture species blossom from a simple songbird millions of years ago. The presence of these birds had filled her with joy. She had seen the grove of rare trees grow from the smallest of seeds. And to see them all being killed, for one species, filled her with rage. And she vowed something that day. She vowed that this rogue ape species would be punished, and exterminated, for their crimes against her. But she needed a conduit through which her wrath could be channelled. And one of the apes would be the ideal choice, her very own Trojan Horse, her secret Agent, the one ape that truly sided with her. Unfortunately for her, all of whom she had seen, and the one that she had spoken to, were more in love with their own species than any others. And so, The Serpent King was left saddened, wondering if there would be any life left to enjoy after the apes were done having their way with her.

--Epilogue (Part III)

The Serpent King soon took the form of a ball python, otherwise known as a royal python, a name to denote her regality, to the discerning. And a species that she chose, due to its inherent ability to appear non-threatening, so as to be able to move uninhibited through the new city.

It had been 15 years since Tara's death, and her city was entering its golden age, having just elected a new chancellor. But The Serpent King still held out hope for a champion, someone who loved her children as much as she did. So to find this person, The King made her way to a pet store in The Epicenter. And for months, she waited, hoping for the one who would be her Agent.

One day, a young man visited the pet store, and asked the attendant about the animals in stock. The attendant said that he did, then asked if he wanted a dog. But the man refused a canine, and inquired, instead, about snakes. The King perked up as she heard this. And soon, the young man came by her cage with the attendant, who then said to him that there were not too many takers for snakes. Adding that people in The Epicenter didn't seem to like them. But the man was adamant, calling “those people" idiots. And said that snakes were wonderful, stating that he

loved them more than anything else in the world. The attendant shrugged, and acquiesced to his request, opening The King's cage and handing her to him, saying that this was the only one they had. The man smiled brightly at his new friend, and said that she was perfect. The man filled out the adoption sheet with The King's new name, and his own. The attendant remarked on the name he'd given her, Jane, then told Silas to be careful with her.

-

Silas then left the pet shop with The Serpent King that he didn't even know he had. Then, he said, with all the affection in the world, that he promised that he would never, ever hurt her. And that he loved her. Silas then petted his reptile companion gently, before taking her home.

The Serpent King then saw, in Silas, what she never had before. A man who loved her kind, more than anything. And in the following 5 years, Silas had loved and cared for her, more than any human, ever had before.

Maggie Archer yelled at her son from downstairs, aggressively ordering him to join his family for breakfast. Silas reluctantly closed *The Wrath of Yig* and got out of bed. But before he went down to his family, he looked back at The Serpent King, in her home of 5 years, and told Jane, his only friend, that he loved her. And with that, he gently closed the door.

The Serpent King had made her choice. And after Silas broke out of prison a few months later, she transcended from her 5-year-old python form, and took off into The Pits, where she would soon greet her Agent, as she knew that Silas Archer would accept her price. And so, he did. And humanity was doomed, ad infinitum.

The Book of Apophis

---The Fort---

The howls and screams of Ranthambore haunted the locals. So much so, that they had taken to sending hunters into its walls, to investigate its strange emissions. But never did they return.

-

Only when it became evident that they were inadequately prepared for this task, a task nothing short of The Labyrinth, they were in need of a Theseus. A man who would enter the maze, and slay the proverbial minotaur. Then, in their time of need, Bagh Shikari, a younger man from Jaipur, came to the village, and volunteered to slay the beast.

-

When he arrived, the village's population had been reduced to only 4 individuals, as the monster had come in the night, and slain all but them. Terrified, the four villagers then begged Bagh to enter The Fort and slay the monster within. For it had taken into its walls another member of their community, and they declared that no monster should be allowed to eat a human body, and that the body should be burned, in the Hindu tradition. Bagh then borrowed a hunting rifle and a flashlight from one of the villagers' houses, and entered The Fort, where the darkness closed in around him upon his descent into the lightless chambers.

-

Within the shadow-enveloped hallways, Bagh crept between the ancient stone walls in search of his target. But as he trod across the blood-stained bones of villagers, Bagh Shikari grew increasingly nervous, and his rifle began to quiver in his hands. And his fear only increased when he heard the sound of claws clicking upon the stone floor, just beyond his sight. And his fear hit a peak when a pair of glowing, yellow eyes appeared before him, and a low growl emitted from beneath the orbs. And from the darkness, there appeared the black stripes and orange fur of a great bengal tiger. White mouth, stained red. As it had, not long ago, eaten that last villager. But raising the rifle to the tiger's face, the cat reacted not. This puzzled Bagh. So much so that he took a closer look at the minotaur of Ranthambore. And after waving his hand in front of its eyes, he realized that the tiger was, in fact, blind. Nor could it appear to smell, as its nose was scarred with what appeared to be a knife wound. The tiger also walked with a pronounced limp, as noticed by Bagh, when the animal turned around and let him be, after being unable to sense his presence amidst the silence. Bagh Shikari now felt a pang of sadness. As he realized that the tiger only hunted the villagers, due to them being easier targets for the crippled cat. Not because it was malicious, but because it was desperate. So Bagh left the tiger there, without firing a shot.

-

Upon his exit from The Fort, the locals were confused. Yet, their confusion was soon overcome with fear, as Bagh shot them all to death. He then carved the remainder of their bodies into pieces, and returned to the cavernous fort.

-

There, he left the meat for the tiger in the hallway in which he'd encountered it. Then, Bagh arranged for large quantities of poultry to be delivered to the village, which had been thoroughly cleaned of carcasses by the time of its arrival.

-

Bagh Shikari, The Tiger Hunter, resided in the village from then on. Using his rifle to kill any hunters who attempted to enter The Fort. And satiated the tiger with regular meals, delivered there by a hired contractor, who had agreed to keep his secret. As he was being paid handsomely to do so.

For over 8 years, this dynamic continued, until the tiger eventually died. When this happened, Bagh buried it in the village, and left that place in peace. He then returned to Jaipur and kept The Fort's secret to himself. And for the rest of his days, never did he tell a soul.

---The Twin Terrors---

The mind, assaulted. The Body, beaten. Both torn into nothing by the twins of terror.

One manifests itself as a gaunt husk, whose shrill vocalizations evoke the sounds of shredded musical instruments, whose bags of wind were given no quarter by the one who had chosen to assail them. Her voice, alone, was enough to scar the minds of those subjected to its cry. And her feeble disposition belied her fiendish mind. A mind that knew nothing but her own voice, and recognized the voices of no others, unless they had been beaten into her skull, via their harsh words.

-

But prevention of this was the role of the ogre, the demon's muscle, and the enforcer of the banshee's will. It was the only reason that those subjected to the banshee’s cries do not thrust,

into its gut, a steel blade.

-

Rusted and spiteful, would be this blade of exhausted restraint, as the knife would be by the time of its use. As restraint is the epitome of patience. And good things come to those who wait.

---Insomnia---

The shattered mirror, the bleeding hand, and the bloodshot eyes. 400 nights, absent from sleep. No rest. No release. No peace.

-

Those two. Those wastrels. Those aberrations. They did this. They tortured me.

One night came, and one night went. And as the moon crossed the star-spangled sky, their white sheets became scarlett as the knife repeatedly entered the cruel, drooling pair of mongrel-like faces. But at last, when the exsanguinated sheets of both metal and cloth were cleaned, and the wastrels were dismembered and disposed of, sleep was once more a possibility. As peace would be now granted by the relief from the dead ones, who had seen to forestall its reluctant advance. But now, it embraced me, as though it had desperately loved, and been graciously received. And sleep was finally reached, after 401 nights of its torturous absence.

---Mythos-The First Wendigo Series---

--Part I (Nazino-1933)

Human nature is ceaseless hunger.

-

And the corruption of society is its product. But society is purely a human construct. So with societal corruption being solely the responsibility of humanity's ceaseless hunger, what does that make its constructors? This malnutrition-induced thought process was on the mind of Ivan, as he witnessed the guards shoot that woman. He hadn't even known her name, but she had been the only one on the barge who'd looked at him. And for the briefest of moments, he was not alone.

He had been abducted by the NKVD the previous month. And into the train car he was thrown by the unflinching men. Upon his arrival at Tomsk, in Siberia, he disembarked the car, only to find a wasteland under his frigid feet. But upon this realization, Ivan was roughly herded with the others onto lumber barges, just beyond their number. And up the Ob River they travelled. And soon, they arrived at a nameless island, where it was said by the locals that monsters hid in the trees. Though, in truth, these monsters were only spirits. The most malevolent spirits described by human folklore.

-

As the prisoners were filed into the forest, the spirits eyed their every move, waiting like predators, scanning their quarry for flaws. And at the weakest and most desperate would they strike.

In a few short weeks, those on Nazino were suffering as no humans had ever suffered before. The guards refused to feed them, and entertained themselves by shooting prisoners for fun. In the initial days, many of the settlers had either frozen or burned to death, depending on how closely they'd slept to their tiny fires. And following this, they were forced to drink the dirty river water, leading to an outbreak of dysentery. All the while, their hunger grew, and their desperation with it. Any who braved the icy waters drowned, while those who made it to the muddy bank were executed by the guards. For those few who escaped, the well-fed guards hunted them for sport, bringing their severed heads as trophies, impaling the ugly spheroid objects on sharpened stakes, and planting them all around the island as a warning to the others. The unseen spirits of

the island delighted in this cruelty towards humans. And all it would take for them to get their chance to feed, would be for one last domino to fall.

-

This “last domino” was an act saved for the most desperate of the vile species, or the ones that were the least connected to others. As the first ones to appear at odds with them, were the first ones to eat human flesh. And the first of these had been Ivan, driven to eat the dead apes by the moaning hunger that echoed through his body and mind. Unable to find release, his humanity crumbled beneath him. And into the starved dead he tore. And on watched the spirits of Nazino, in anticipation of his vanity’s final surrender.

It happened slowly, as the spirit entered his body through the emaciated carcasses that he consumed. And inside of him, it thrived in his desperation. And soon, it told him, in a whisper, to eat the living, for they were fresh. And so, Ivan obeyed.

-

His squealing victims took his teeth, but never did his predation cease. Eventually, other prisoners had taken Ivan's example. And they all became the homes of several other spirits. In total, 12 prisoners had been warped into something monstrous. The embodiment of diabolical wickedness, creatures born out of the minds of the Algonquins. And they soon began to turn their teeth towards the others, reducing the already dwindling population of Nazino down to 0, in 2 short days. They then killed and ate the guards, followed by a boat that was filled to the brim with newly arriving prisoners and those that guarded them. But after the slaughter, the 12 creatures, exhausted of food, swam the Ob River to freedom. And Nazino Island was left dehumanized, and depopulated.

--Part II (Siberia-1933)

Beyond the Ob, the creatures began their rampage. The nearby hamlets were the first to be made ghost towns. And the 12 creatures, created at Nazino, grew ever more powerful with each screaming meal. Blood soon soaked the snow. And Ivan stayed near Nazino Island, while the 11 others made off into other regions of Russia, and beyond.

-

Some went north, other went south, but most of them went east, into other parts of Siberia. And everywhere they went, the few surviving locals were forever tormented with the echoing cries of

what they were calling “demonov”, or demons. Monsters that butchered and ate their children, and could not seemingly be killed.

-

In response to an attack on one of his transports, Stalin ordered that these creatures be hunted down and killed. But he refused to offer a reward for their heads, as he wanted nothing more than to cover them up, so as to appear the perfect communist utopia. A vision that could not afford to be tainted. However, after he sent a special Red Army battalion to eliminate them, the soldiers never returned. Reasoning that they had most likely been killed, Stalin then rolled back his policy of hunting the creatures down, and simply worked to conceal their existence from his citizens, and more importantly to the dictator, the outside world.

Over 8 decades of murder and cannibalism followed The Nazino Affair. All the while, The Soviet Union denied any reports from Siberia regarding the creatures, quietly archiving any that came in.

-

However, after the titanic collapse of 1991, the independent countries that emerged from the ashes were subsequently privy to those records. Coincidentally, one of The Union’s former satellites found itself at the mercy of one of the 12 creatures from the aptly named Cannibal Island.

--Part III (Mongolia-2012)

Those who had lived in Siberia over the 80-year period of carnage never failed to tell those around them of the stag-headed creatures, and what they had done to their loved ones. And with the dissolution of The USSR, the gates of knowledge were pried open, within which were archived the events of 1933. Though, this was scant coverage, at best. As even The Soviets were in the dark. Little information about them existed, outside of Algonquin legend. Then, the pieces began to coalesse when some of the Russian researchers came across these legends in their investigations, revealing striking similarities between their monsters, and the natives’ descriptions of malevolent entities known as wendigos. These were diabolical beings that “devoured mankind”, created when a human resorts to cannibalism in a bid to survive. Abandoning their humanity to ensure their survival. This was fertile ground for the wendigo spirits, immortal, amorphous demonic entities that possessed only the most depraved and inhuman humans available to them. Once this was done, and the spirit latched onto them, the

transformation began, turning the human into something entirely different. A massive beast, with the skull of a stag serving as its head, adorned with massive antlers. Its physical form solidified, the beast perpetually roamed the environment, driven by its unending starvation, preying upon any humans that cross its path. However, its hunger cannot ever be sated, and its quest for new victims is eternal. This forces them to constantly wander into new areas in search of food, no matter how far it needs to go.

It was mid-October in northern Mongolia's frozen landscape. The icy grip of winter had already tightened, and most of the locals in the small, sleepy town of Murun were shut-in for the season, save for one whose tenacious hunts commenced as the snow fell.

Jebe used a horse for hunting during the winter. As an equine was more suited to traversing the snow than anything with a motor. Add to that, the instincts of a horse served Jebe well in the wide open steppe. Especially, when encountering a potential threat when he was miles from any help. His Mongolian heritage was also a great source of pride for him, given his parents' decision to name their son after the Chinggisid General, and he wished to keep his hunts more or less traditional. Hence, the thoroughbred Mongol horse, and the deadly hunter astride it. In accordance with this affinity for tradition and reliability, Jebe also carried with him a recurve bow for his hunting trips, as well as a sizable hunting knife, which was a family heirloom, said by his father to be from the days of Genghis Khan. His father had, in fact, named his son after the great Chinggisid general Jebe, and had raised him to embrace his roots. And Jebe had never lost this reverence instilled by his father, even carving the man's name into his handmade bow. But this weapon, alone, would not fare well against the monster that he had decided to pursue.

He had been drawn in by its elk-like cries, echoing over the steppe as he scanned the hills for prey. Thinking that it would make for a good meal, or several, as well as a substantial trophy, Jebe turned his horse in the direction of the sounds, not realizing that he was walking right into the creature's trap.

-

It charged him from the top of a nearby hill, after successfully drawing him in, using the man's instincts and arrogance to lull him into a false sense of confidence with the prospect of a large prey item at his mercy. Jebe had never been so afraid of another living thing before, as it bellowed through its stag-like skull, and its antlers pierced his horse's gut, throwing Jebe from its back and into the driving snow. The horse was then killed, as The Wendigo tore its antlers from its body. But the equine appealed not to the monster, as it greatly desired human flesh, above all other varieties. And the Mongolian, just ahead of it, served as a more enticing meal. It then

charged Jebe, who had drawn an arrow from his quiver, and attempted to thrust it into the wendigo's body. But its matted fur-covered skin remained unpenetrated, and its claws then grazed Jebe's face, leaving scars that would remain for the rest of his life. The wendigo then pounced upon him, clawing mercilessly at his body. But Jebe rolled into his hunting knife, which had been thrown from his belt, and with it, and much effort, he finally managed to pierce the wendigo's skin. Thick black blood then streamed from the wound, and ingrained itself into the blade. The foul-smelling substance then, seemingly, made the knife slip more easily into the beast's torso. Seeing this, Jebe also noticed the thick black substance covering the tip of one of his discarded arrows. Thinking fast, he thrust the knife deeper into his enemy and quickly snatched the dyed arrow from beneath it, and upon rolling backwards into his bow, he recovered the weapon and shot the monster through its stag skull head. The wendigo then spat blood into the snow, briefly staggered about on its hoofed feet, expelled yet more blood from its mouth, which fell limply open as the monster collapsed, and died. Breathing heavily, Jebe then moved to recover his weapons, and found all of his arrows buried underneath the wendigo's body, and as such, they were now stained black, as was the arrow that killed the beast. His knife, which he'd wrenched free from deep within the wendigo's hide, was also stained black. Collecting his weapons, and realizing their unintentional improvements, Jebe decided to give this edge to all of his other points and blades, and so dragged the wendigo's body back to his house, leaving his dead horse to freeze solid in the snow.

-

Back at home, Jebe treated his wounds, and infused his remaining weapons with the monster's blood. And as he did so, he wondered why his knife had first penetrated the creature, when his arrows, initially, had done nothing. He puzzled over this as he cut open the wendigo's neck and spilled its veins with this most perplexing of weapons.

--Part IV (China-2012)

Far across the border, in Manchuria, another wendigo was leaving a number of human bodies in its blood-caked path. Upon hearing of this strange and deadly creature roaming the countryside, The Chinese Communist Party quietly commissioned a secret task force to capture it alive, so it could be studied.

-

This mission went badly at first, with the entire force being killed. But eventually, after 2 other failed attempts, the wendigo was successfully captured with help from a division of The People's Liberation Army. Using a number of steel cables, fired from large net-guns, the beast was bound and subdued. Then, it was transported to a secret facility, close to Beijing, wherein, a group of scientists began to test the creature's limits.

-

The wendigo was placed into a ballistic glass enclosure, where it had its black blood extracted after repeated failure to puncture its skin. This was finally accomplished using an extremely small syringe, whose tip was made from obsidian, measuring to around 3 atoms thick. The researchers then concluded that its skin was likely akin to a tightly-woven vest, needing an excessively sharp implement to slice through it. It was then that they also discovered that its blood acted as a lubricant of sorts when applied to any other type of sharp, bladelike steel. Allowing it to slip nicely into the creature's skin, bypassing the close-knit fibers. Given this condition, bullets were found to be too round of objects to pierce it, even when fired from an anti-aircraft gun or even a sniper rifle. The wendigo was subsequently shocked with cattle prods to test its resistance to electric stimulation. The results were predictably fascinating, with the monster flinching at the sensation of the shock, but its nervous system remaining unresponsive. As if it was reacting solely to the prospect of an electric shock, rather than the jolt itself. This idea was further tested with acid, fire, and biochemical agents. All of which showed similar results. The monster was undamaged, but it flinched, nonetheless.

-

The scientists had extracted many DNA samples from the wendigo, using a long pole with an obsidian syringe capping the end. They now had over 50 tubes of black blood in cold storage. All the while, subjecting the beast to yet more experiments. Ranging from exposure to household chemicals, to other animals, and even to bioweapons and radiation. All of which, the wendigo seemed to despise, while remaining physically unaffected by every single one. With every prod, injection, and attack, the monster's anger seemed to grow. And with every meal, so did its strength and intelligence.

A month later, the facility was slick with blood, as by then, the scientists had figured out that it fared best when fed human flesh. This, they accomplished with political prisoners, as if sacrificing them, to this elder monster, a monster that became evermore restless. Its hunger was unending, and so could not be sustained for long in a glass cage. So when its occupant was restrained, and its cage was opened to feed it, the wendigo saw its chance, and broke free of the restraints. It then killed the orderly, who was tasked with feeding it, and escaped the facility, disappearing into the hills, far beyond the city.

Hours later, the scientists discovered the escape. But they found that the blood was still preserved in storage. And, with approval from The CCP, after its own failure to locate and recapture the creature, the scientists began experimenting with the oily substance. And through this series of acts, China would plunge the entirety of northern Asia into crisis.

--Part V (Kazakhstan-2012)

In Central Asia, the locals told tales of monsters in the hills, hiding for decades. And upon the death of a small girl at the hands of one of these pronged creatures, followed by another child, and then another, a Kazakh in the far north east of the country, remembered a friend of hers living in Mongolia, who knew of a hunter in Murun who had slain one.

Since his victory, Jebe had become famous in his community, as months earlier, he had killed the strange creature in the vast steppe and brought it back to his lonely house, where he butchered it and infused his arsenal with its putrid blood. Though, he had refused to eat its tainted flesh. Instead, he had brought it back to Murun, to show the people. And thereafter, he was lionized as a hero. It was then that Jebe received a call from his friend about Kazakhstan. And after realizing the identity of their monster as the same variety that had attacked him, he quickly gathered his weapons, mounted his new horse, and rode for the beast, determined to return to Mongolia with its severed head hanging from his saddle.

Ridder was a small city in northeastern Kazakhstan. And it was here that a fourth child had been taken into the local forest by the monster. As it turned out, she had wandered away from her family during a camping trip in the mountains further north of the city. And when her screams awoke her parents, they tried to track her, but to no avail. And in winter’s onset, they and the other townsfolk had assumed their daughter’s death. Jebe later confirmed this after he had made it to Ridder and discovered the half-eaten remains in the woods. Jebe then began to track the culprit from that site, deeper into the forest. It was mid-January, and the winter weather was battering the area. The wind tore through the bald trees, creating an omnipresent howl. An orchestra that stunted Jebe's hearing, as the culprit charged him from behind.

-

However, the horse heard the wendigo’s approach. And as it jigged to evade its pursuer, Jebe spun around on the saddle, where his eyes met those of the monster's hollow skull. He immediately drew his bow, but was unable to aim properly in his position. So he decided to lurch his horse forward, as the wendigo chased him through the darkness. Jebe frantically searched his mind for a strategy, while the horse was slowing from exhaustion, and the wendigo was gaining on them. But Jebe then rounded a tree, with his arrow drawn. And this caught the creature off guard, giving The Mongolian the upper hand, as his arrow met its arching back. The beast let loose an almighty howl, as the tainted steel easily split its natural armor. It then turned and began to run away from the mounted archer. The Mongolian chased it, and the predator had become the prey.

-

Eventually though, the beast rounded to meet Jebe, head on. But instead, an arrow met its throat, bringing the creature down.

Jebe hauled the body back to Ridder a few days later, and the city rejoiced. Jebe however, did not, as he was lost in thought. This was the second time he'd slain one of these creatures. And he began to wonder if there were more of them. And if so, how many? It was a grim thread, but one that Jebe was now keen to pull on. The Mongolian then mounted his horse and retraced the steps taken by his most recent kill, a path that took him to Siberia's Ob River.

--Part VI (China-2012)

After the escape of the first wendigo, The Chinese Communist Party poured more resources into studying its blood. In time, a new body of scientists had used it to create a genetically identical clone of the escaped monster. And after lengthy tests, its own blood was also extracted and stored at the facility.

It was several weeks after this breakthrough that Chinese spies in Kazakhstan reported that a similar creature had been killed in the small city of Ridder. And that another was slain in Mongolia, days before that. Though they did not know who had been responsible, they sent investigators into various countries, throughout Asia, to find more evidence as to what these creatures were, and how many of them were out there. They were not privy to the Russian research, as the latter nation did not wish to potentially alienate their geopolitical ally with tales of spirits and monsters in the woods. The bear continued its stance of blanket denial of any knowledge of these creatures, clinging to its Soviet era policy, like a child to its mother's leg when approached by a doctor with a needle. This left China to conduct their research on their own.

When these investigators returned to China, months later, the collected data greatly concerned The CCP. There were reported to be around 10 of these creatures that were still alive, not including their new clone. And most of them were reputed to be in Siberia. More importantly though, was the investigators discovering their identity. They were found to be called wendigos by the American Algonquins. And those legends told of their ceaseless hunger, and of their abilities, and their agelessness. And though The CCP was initially skeptical, they soon accepted

the reality of the creatures. And now saw them as a threat, and so sought to have them all killed. There was one problem however, the wendigos could not be hunted down by China without creating an international incident in Russia, given the latter country’s earlier refusal to cooperate. China would need a subtler way to kill the creatures off. It was then that one particularly zealous Chinese scientist suggested that they create a different wendigo that could do the job. To craft a controllable monster that could hunt down and kill the others, while leaving humanity untouched. After extensive deliberations between party members, The President gave the order to make it happen.

Lue-Duo Zhe was a convicted murderer of 35 people, victims he’d decapitated and piled up over the course of only a single year. Upon his arrest and conviction, he was sentenced to death. However, when The CCP gave their scientists the order to create a wendigo that could be brought under humanity's control, Lue-Duo was chosen to be their new guinea pig. A weapon for humanity's use. Something that they could train and condition to slay other wendigos. The Chinese would kill the monsters that threatened them, by concocting one of their own.

-

Lue-Duo Zhe was taken to the facility in an armored truck. Upon his arrival, he was strapped into a wheelchair and injected with the blood of the cloned wendigo. Subsequently, Lue-Duo was callously thrown into a ballistic glass chamber, identical to the one that held his unwilling donor. The two containers were then welded together. And the walls facing one another, between the two boxes, were removed and replaced with a gate that could be raised and lowered, via remote control. The restraints on both subjects were then released. And as the clone’s hunger gnawed, Lue-Duo was feeling the venomous effects of its blood merging with his own.

As a wendigo spirit was already accustomed to possessing humans, the blood of the resulting beast, though black and putrid, was found to be extremely compatible with the rogue ape species. This was concluded in the prior research using simple chemical analysis, microscopically comparing the blood of the two seemingly opposed creatures. Though, the scientists had never injected vile black liquid into a living human, until now. And the results were more horrifying than they had anticipated.

Over the next few weeks, Lue-Duo's condition began to deteriorate. And his mind and body began to warp. His eyes grew wide and blackened, and his skin grew pale and sickly as it stretched taut over his bones. His musculature however, was highly pronounced, as he could now break the ballistic glass, forcing the scientists to replace it with a stronger plastic. But even this cracked upon his strikes. But it was during one of these bouts of anger that the lead

scientist noticed something in this Hybrid’s eyes, a certain spark, something that appealed to human vanity, and signalled to their species, a kindred spirit, one who could think as they did. It was at this moment in time, that the scientists realized that their genetic concoction possessed something that they did not anticipate, a mind that matched their own, held within a being that could not speak a single word.

Meanwhile, in a lone cave, far beyond Manchuria, a giant soundly slept. That was, until The Hybrid was created in China, a nation known to this giant for its disregard of the natural world. And it appeared to do so again when it created yet another tool of human domination. The giant, whose name was Ryu, knew well that the wendigo was far more than just a monster. It was an agent of nature, possessing the most desperate of humans, to turn them into her very own agents. But humanity had distorted one, to its own ends. And this aberration could not be allowed to continue. So the giant Ryu drew himself forth from his cave, and slithered silently towards humanity's greatest weapon. A weapon that they were preparing to unleash.

---Self-Inflicted Prions---

I see them often. Their erratic movements, their malaise and lounging about, as if their minds have completely gone and The Laughing Sickness has afflicted them. Like Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis, or BSE, a prion that attacks the brain and leaves those that it has tormented with not but a form of languishing behavior. And I then think, *why do they willfully drag their own minds through the gutter? And beat it into a bitter, thoughtless paste?*

-

Humans in 2023 apparently enjoy Amsterdam, in The Netherlands. At first, I imagined that this was due to the history thronging the region. But then, I learned of their true intentions. And I was left confused, once again, by their desires. As they only travelled to the city, a city of massive historical significance, for the purpose of legal intoxication.

-

Humans are so shallow, and unforgivably pathetic little things, to whom self-inflicted prions are all that matters to them. Such numb little worlds they live in. Such feeble minds. Such wasteful expenditures of potential. A potential that is left atrophied by the ceaseless want of humans to be numb.

---The Pit---

If one is unfortunate enough to find themselves in The Pit, their agony will endure to the eventual point of numbness. And they will gradually learn that those who have been also cast into The Pit have one thing in common. They all try to climb out. Climb to the light, and clamber over each other just to stay in the sun's embrace. And most who try to ascend fail and die, broken, at the bottom, only to be eaten by the others. Such is life, a life chosen by those who yearn for love.

It is bitter poison, the collective avarice of all who pine for the affections of one who conjures conflict among the masses. And into each other do these drooling and begging dogs tear. Their limbs being cast from their bodies by their competitor's jaws. And the few who survive the cull face a new challenge. Begging for scraps of attention. And in lieu of civility, violence prevails. And the dead begin to mount, once again. And only the strong survive. But in the end, they remain at the mercy of the conflict's conjurer. And this time, she had decided against him, blood icing the cake of death, rendered into empty calories. And eating it was unhealthy. And baking it

was useless.

-

The contest of gore had yielded nothing. An empty effort. A lost cause. And The Conjurer chose someone else. The one left standing was worth nothing. And so, he slit his own throat, and leaned backwards. And into The Pit did he return his remains. In the end, he was a caution, a warning to all imprisoned within The Pit of competition. His death was a cloaked and venomous whisper. And it told them all to escape. But never did they heed his voice. And so, they kept piling and pining, until The Pit was empty.

---Mythos-The Second Wendigo Series---

--Part VII (Ivan Returns)

Jebe had been in Siberia, near Nazino Island, for the past few months, hunting the wendigo roaming the woods, as it had been, since 1933.

The Nazino locals had told him everything. About the affair, about the creatures, and about the cannibalism on the island. With this information, Jebe began to hunt the one that he would never come to know as Ivan.

Ivan of Nazino had been the first of the prisoners to eat human flesh. And once the spirits saw him do this, they saw fit to turn his disregard of humanity into nature's very own weapon. Ivan was then followed in his cannibalistic footsteps by 11 others, all of whom also became wendigos. It had been 2 of these that were killed by Jebe. And one other that had been cloned, and whose DNA now coursed through the veins of a human killer. But this was not known by the Mongolian hunter, who scanned the forest from atop his horse. But from the white darkness, Ivan found him first, and lunged for the Mongol’s mount.

-

Jebe was, yet again, thrown from his horse as Ivan gutted the equine alive with his claws and subsequently came for Jebe. But the Mongolian quickly recovered a tainted arrow. And with his bow still in hand, he shot his pursuer through the shoulder. Alas, this was not a lethal wound, and the wendigo continued to pursue him.

Jebe reached the Nazino hamlet, just south of where Ivan had attacked him. And just across the Ob River was the nameless island where he’d been created. Upon his entry into the Nazino ghost town, he hid himself in a dilapidated wooden house, just in time for his nemesis to appear beyond its walls. At the wendigo's approach, the Mongolian set another arrow, and sent it sailing into the right eye socket of the abominable stag skull that peeked in from outside, catapulting Ivan into a fit of rage. He then tore into the building, where Jebe shot him once again, the arrow lodging itself into Ivan’s left leg, but he would not cease while he starved. Jebe then darted just past him, and ran to the river, not far from the house. And into the freezing water he leaped, as Ivan chased after him.

Jebe scrambled ashore and ducked into the dense undergrowth. Quickly placing a handful of snow into his mouth, in an effort to hide his breath, he crouched further down into the bushes as Ivan emerged from the water, just meters away from his position. The wendigo's one functioning eye socket scanned the surrounding area for its target as Jebe waited in complete silence. Then, slowly, The Wendigo Hunter drew his final arrow and tied his tainted knife to its tip, just before he notched it. He knew that he was at a close enough range where distance and weight of such a combination would not be an issue. The Mongolian then loosed the shaft into Ivan’s neck, expelling a torrent of black blood from the monster’s tainted arteries in such excess, that it began to bleed to death. But not before it struck Jebe in the throat with its clawed fingers, spilling Jebe’s own veins. The snow beneath the combatants soon ran with the opposing dyes, blending into a tapestry of death. Both hunters then collapsed and bled to death, in unison. The first person to become a wendigo, and the first person to kill one, whose combined power created the greatest predator that had ever lived.

--Part VIII (The Wendigo Killer)

The Chinese had long been guilty of warping nature. From The Yellow River under the Xia Dynasty, to their clogging of the artery that was The Yangtze River with the fetid concrete plaque that was Three Gorges Dam, leading to the extinction of the chinese paddlefish. And they had done it again. With the creation of The Hybrid, the Chinese had sought to save themselves from nature's agents by contorting nature, itself, into a subject under their control. However, humanity's very tendency to do this was always the undoing of their torrid species. But they never realized this in time to amend their mistakes, if they ever realized it at all. And in Manchuria, their intention was clear. After training The Hybrid to attack and kill simulated wendigos, using the blood to create approximations of them with dead people, the creature would be released into the wild, to hunt and kill the remaining monsters from Nazino. Of which, only 9 remained alive. However, the victory that they wanted so badly was not yet in sight. The Chinese needed to test The Hybrid's capabilities against a live wendigo. Thus The Clone’s other purpose..

-

The plastic divider between the two monsters was removed. And The Clone was killed in moments, as it stood no chance against The Hybrid, who soon painted the container black with the blood of the manufactured enemy. The lead scientist smiled from behind the newly decorated glass, a smile that faded as The Hybrid began to break through it. But it was subdued before it could escape. And it was, again, closed into its ballistic plastic container.

The CCP then gave their immediate approval, following the test. Even going so far as to dub their creation "The Wendigo Killer". And soon, the party ordered The Hybrid to be unleashed. The scientists however, were highly skeptical of their ability to control the creature, especially as it showed signs of human-like intelligence. But The CCP was insistent, and even resorted to threatening them all with imprisonment if they did not comply. Backed into a corner, the scientists hauled the plastic cell out of the facility and trucked it into the Manchurian countryside. Then, they reluctantly unlocked the container, only for The Hybrid to slaughter them all as soon as the door was ajar. It then ran back into the facility, where it used its sapient intellect to skillfully hunt down and kill every single human in the compound, blood soon running through the hallways like crimson rivers. But The Hybrid was not yet finished. It then gathered flammable chemicals from throughout the facility, only to break them free of their containers, lacing the compound with fuel. The Hybrid then set flame to their contents, and escaped the great explosions that ripped through the buildings. This monster, created by corrupting nature's agents, then disappeared into the night, and began to hunt those very agents down, one by one.

After news of the escape reached them, The Chinese Communist Party apologized not, merely taking care that no citizen discovered what had transpired. Then, the party ordered the entire site be covered in a thick layer of Earth. The internet was then scrubbed of its name.

--Part IX (The Apex Predator)

In the depths of Siberia, a wendigo chased its latest target through the dense pines, when a great log fell upon it from above after tripping a wire, pinning its body underneath the massive weight and crushing its bones and breaking its antler. It cried its echoing cry into the snowbound forest, only for The Hybrid to drop down to it from its hiding place and swiftly wrench the creature’s head from its body, silencing its screams. The Hybrid had set a trap. And soon realized that this “sapien method” would be a far more effective hunting strategy than what was performed by the 8 remaining beasts. The Hybrid then tapped into its human-half, and thought to itself, *I'm no animal, I am human. So I will hunt these animals, as my species does.* And with that, The Hybrid put the wendigo's detached skull on a wooden spike. And left it there without eating anything.

Further north, The Hybrid led another wendigo into a chase in the forest by releasing a sheep from a nearby ranch. When there, it fell into a deep pit, lined with sharpened wooden stakes, impaling the wendigo upon the tainted points, blackened by The Hybrid’s own blood.

To the west, in the shadow of the Ural Mountains, another beast was crossing a shallow river, when its foot became skewered by a spiked box, hidden there by The Hybrid. Which was soon called forth by the cries of the monster it had snared. It dragged its claws through the throat of its prey, letting it collapse into the icy water.

The third wendigo was located not far south of the river, where it was struck in the face by a heavy, spiked pendulum that swung downward from a tree. The tainted thagomizers retained the stag-like skull, as it had become skewered on their points. The rest of the body limply detached from the neck and fell into the snow beneath the swaying, dripping ornament.

In the interior of Siberia, the fourth was aggressively clamped in place by a wooden bear trap. And The Hybrid, again, slashed open its throat with its claws, once more abruptly silencing the wendigo's cries.

The next one was impaled upon spikes crowning a sapling that was tied back upon itself with a thin tripline. A wire cut by its unsuspecting victim. To finish off his quarry, The Hybrid opened its back, severing its spinal cord.

The next one was snared from above with a strand of barbed wire, stolen from a nearby fence. The neck of the wendigo was ripped into by the twisted, rusty spines and garotted to asphyxiation by the formidable line of metal. Its stomach was then slashed open by its half-sapient trapper.

The next one was, amazingly, blown to pieces with an improvised landmine, laid there by The Hybrid. Amazing because it had very quickly discovered the capabilities of gunpowder, learning from its experiences in the Chinese facility in which it had been born, and stealing the materials from a nearby dwelling of mad bombers, all of whom it killed. And soon after, so was the second-to-last wendigo.

The final pronged cannibal was slain in a manner most human. In southern Siberia, the last

Nazino wendigo was killed when its antlers tripped a line that was connected to a dead rancher's shotgun, whose shells had been loaded with sharp metal slivers, each The Hybrid had tainted with its own blood. And so, the last of nature's agents was dead. And the agent of humanity had accomplished its mission.

-

But like the apes that had created it, The Wendigo Killer's hunger was ceaseless. And it soon found itself starving once again. It had not eaten any of the wendigos it had killed, rather, it consumed the people that it had found along the way. But after it had succeeded in its task, placed into its mind by the Chinese, it no longer had to fear any rivals that it knew of. Save for one particularly powerful species. It then sought to eliminate its only real competition. The species that had first corrupted nature with The Hybrid's very creation. And with its own existence.

--Part X (The Reptile)

Still in his cave, Ryu the Great Python waited. He was ancient, and had seen countless things in his long 2,000 years of existence. But in the past few decades, never had he witnessed humans fell so many other living things in such a short stretch of time, and enslave the ones that it didn't slaughter. However, knowing that the apes would one day kill themselves in their attempt to save their own species, and lacking the power to exterminate them himself, he could do very little to stay their hand. But the punishment of humanity was not his role either way, for that was the intended role of the antlered horrors, born only after The Soviets ravaged the world they called home. An inversion of their sins, that feasted purely upon the twisted species that had led to their creation.

-

But now that the wendigos were all dead, humanity’s abhorrent corruption of this purpose’s only competition was that very same species. And so, it now killed the apes indiscriminately. And ate the ones that it didn’t leave for the crows. It was a product of humanity's distortion of nature. To the giant python, it was an abomination in need of destruction.

-

The Hybrid was in Siberia, however. And Ryu could not traverse there during winter. As he was a reptile, he would quickly freeze to death in the cold. And so, needed to wait until the spring before The Hybrid could be hunted and killed.

But in time, the snow would melt, and the python could then enter Siberia. However, that was still an entire month away, and The Hybrid was just getting started.

--Part XI (Scarlet Snow)

On The Amur River, in eastern Russia, The Hybrid had killed over 100,000 people in less than 2 days. This was the culmination of a week-long killing spree, enacted from the middle of Siberia to the mouth of The Amur River, with a trail of over 600,000 human carcasses in its wake. A day later, The Hybrid crossed The Amur and into the border of Chinese Manchuria, slaying everyone in its path, from the border to the city of Beijing. Once in the capital, The CCP attempted to cease its relentless assault, at any possible expense.

-

The Hybrid slaughtered nearly everyone in the city in less than 2 weeks. Ever the cowardly bureaucrats, The CCP had barricaded its entire governing body within its headquarters at Zhongnanhai. But The Hybrid had wiped out most of the PLA soldiers that were charged guarding the complex. The Chinese government officials then lay unprotected. Hours later, they were all dead, The Hybrid hungrily tearing into their corpses. But soon, it left Zhongnanhai and made its way to The Korean Peninsula.

Down the thin corridor of land, it carved a blood-stained roadway, bringing down every government in its path, butchering and eating the citizens of these countries, en masse. When The Hybrid crossed into the southern portion of Korea, The United Nations finally met in New York City to discuss a strategy to end the threat it posed.

But for Ryu, the conversations of strategy in The UN were just that, conversations, which produced no tangible results.

The Hybrid soon dismantled the government of South Korea, taking down its formidable military command in the process. It then left Seoul nearly depopulated. But The Hybrid was anything but satisfied, turning around and returning to Chinese soil, then crossing into Russia, once again.

However, Ryu could still not pursue his quarry, due to the persistent cold of the places where it had been. But the fact that it had retreated back into Siberia, meant that it was nearly time for him to end the reign of The Wendigo Killer, but not before another long 2 weeks of death and destruction across northern Asia.

By the time the Gregorian was a week away from March, there was almost no one left in the entirety of northern Asia. The Hybrid had killed and eaten over 40 million people in less than a month from Korea to the Ural Mountains. The UN had, at last, commissioned 1000 troops, armed them with weapons of every description, and sent them into Russia to kill The Hybrid, once and for all. Surprisingly though, The Kremlin denied their entry, deciding to send a large force of its own Spetsnaz units to deal with the monster.

-

None of them returned alive. However, one of their severed heads was sent to The Kremlin, the oblong visage pierced through with a wooden stake. This prompted the Russian government leaders, fearing their befalling the same grisly end as the communist party in China, a country which was in complete chaos, ever since, to panic, board a private plane, and fly to safety in Havana, Cuba.

Meanwhile, Ryu continued waiting as The UN took it upon themselves to send their 1000 strong army into Siberia, following the Russian leadership's abandonment of the country. Their wiry target killed them all, just as easily as the Spetsnaz. Complete with the proverbial red cherry of the leader’s severed cephalus, capping the latest cake of corpses at The Wendigo Killer's feet. And with that, it was nearly over for the human species. Because, according to The UN leaders, nothing short of a nuclear strike would end the reign of The Hybrid. Nothing, at least, that they knew of.

Ryu knew that The Hybrid would not stop at humanity, for the creature’s ceaseless hunger, human cognition, and physical strength increased with every person that it consumed, progressively granting it the capabilities to annihilate armies and destroy nations. And he understood that an ever-more powerful predator, whose existence was predicated on an endless and ever-growing hunger, would see that every living thing on Earth would be killed and eaten. And if The Hybrid could kill millions of people in only a month, it could wipe out all life on land in a matter of years. So Ryu needed to locate and snuff out The Hybrid before it spelled the end of all life, save for its own. And this would need to happen as soon as possible to prevent any more death. And so, when the weather finally warmed substantially, and the ribbons of

snakes emerged from their dens in northern Asia, Ryu the Great Python slipped from his cave-by-the-sea, and made his way towards a much warmer Siberia.

--Part XII (Life vs. Death)

Ryu reached South Korea after swimming the perilous Sea of Japan from his cave in the Ryukyu island chain. Upon his clandestine slithering into Pusan, he quickly found a fleck of long-dried black blood staining a ruined wall. He collected the scent with his forked tongue, and identified it as that of a human, with a tang of something foul. And with that, Ryu had locked onto his target and crawled his way north.

After crossing into North Korea, Ryu kept collecting taste after taste of The Hybrid. The very few people left in The DPRK however, took it ill that a giant python should be there, due to their indoctrination of snake hatred, courtesy of Yahweh. The destitute citizens of what was once North Korea attacked Ryu, who promptly slithered away from them. As he had far more important things to attend to, and was long accustomed to humanity’s scorn of him.

Ryu then traversed into Chinese Manchuria, hoping that his target would be there. Though it wasn't, it smelled as though it was not far away. But a few days of searching later, Ryu entered southern Siberia, and was caught by surprise when his prey found him first.

-

The Hybrid had been hopping between trees in the forest, just above the great snake's position. And upon seeing the python below it, The Hybrid dropped onto his back, as a goliath spider would drop onto a hapless bird. Ryu hissed in pain, anger, and surprise, as he attempted to shake The Hybrid off of his back by erratically writhing his serpent body. But his enemy possessed a formidable talent for latching onto its prey, and Ryu eventually slithered swiftly through the mud, thrashing himself into the trees, in an attempt to dislodge his nemesis. Eventually, The Hybrid was thrown off, but ripped Ryu's skin as its claws left his scales. The python then drew his sinuous body away from his enemy, who had been sent into the mud, nearby. As The Hybrid regathered itself, Ryu grew more furious. He writhed backwards, and hissed viciously at his enemy. The Hybrid cried his humanoid wail, tinged with the elk-like sound of a wendigo. The python then repeatedly struck at the abomination, but his adversary managed to evade him. And into his scaly body, did The Hybrid drive its claws. Ryu quickly responded with a bite to the creature's shoulder, his grip unflinching until his enemy clawed his eye, forcing Ryu to release his jaws, only for the snake to whip The Hybrid with his tail, once more sending it

to the ground. Then, using all of his strength, Ryu struck his enemy again, this time latching onto its head and managing to wrap himself around The Wendigo Killer. The monstrous cannibal flailed about in Ryu’s relentlessly tightening grip, kicking its legs into his scaly side in a desperate attempt to escape. But slowly, The Great Python constricted it to death, its pale arm falling limp against his body. And with the dull cracks cascading into the finality of the dying pops of its fetid bones, The Hybrid's short, violent reign as apex predator had come to a brutally crushing end.

--Epilogue

Ryu was the only creature that could've killed what humanity had unleashed. However, they appreciated him not. And as he did not possess the power to kill them all, humanity would almost certainly create a thousand things like The Hybrid, in an attempt to dominate all other life. As long as this continued, Ryu the Great Python's work would never be finished. And as he returned to his cave by the sea, he knew all too well that he would need to amend yet more of humanity's countless and constant mistakes, as he had been doing ever since he was made immortal.

---Mythos-Eden---

Snakes are beautiful. But this is lost in the Judeo-Christian tradition, whose revered texts paint them as all that they are not.

-

Genesis is a lie, not only in its events, but also in its concepts. And it brands "evil" those that I love more than anything else in the world. It is the source of much of humanity’s most detestable qualities, and serves as a testament to the true scale of the vanity, callousness, malice, hubris, and arrogance of the self-righteous apes. All to the detriment of life, itself.

The Snake found his way around a great ancient tree in a beautiful garden, eventually coming to its golden canopy. He had been pursuing rodents in the flower-clad bushes, when one of the furry morsels scampered up the tree, whose branches bore a lucious and radiant fruit. But before long, the rodent jumped from the tree, escaping the snake’s jaws. And after resting on one of the branches, following the exhausting ordeal, he felt himself fall asleep.

When the snake awoke, a voice was yelling at him, claiming that he had desecrated its sacred garden, and that he would be punished. The snake was shocked, not knowing who this being was, and courteously asked for the voice's identity, and calmly said that he had simply fallen asleep in the tree. The being claimed to be named Yahweh, and was clearly immune to reason, ordering him to speak no more, claiming that he was also an agent of something called Satan. Yahweh then told the snake that he would be made to crawl on his belly for eternity. But the snake then responded by reasoning that he could climb things, such as this very tree, and that he didn't need to crawl to get anywhere. But Yahweh listened not, commanding him to be silent and referring to him as a wyrm. Yahweh then said that he would vilify his kind to the descendants of Adam, forever. The Snake was gobsmacked, asking Yahweh who Adam was, and why he would do this. Yahweh scolded him, demanding to know why he would question him. The snake then asked why Yahweh was even angry with him, as he had not made clear the crimes of which he'd been accused. Yahweh thought for a moment, then declared that the snake had convinced someone named Eve to eat "that fruit" and pointed to one of the apple-like ornaments on the tree in which the serpent lay. The snake then said that he hadn't spoken to anyone named Eve, then said that he'd been asleep and had woken up to Yahweh screaming at him. The petulant entity thought for a moment again, then uttered the name "Satan" under his breath, as if to not allow the epithet to leave the boundaries of their conversion. The Snake then finally asked who this "Satan" was. Yahweh's demeanor suddenly shifted in response to the question, then he answered in a haste, and claimed that Satan was his "jailor". The Snake then asked Yahweh why he would even require a jailor, but Yahweh didn't answer his question. However, Yahweh then whispered a confession to the snake that he couldn't go back on anything now. He needed to appear omniscient, and couldn't do that if he admitted to any accusations, no matter how founded. The Snake then realized what Yahweh meant and was shocked, asking if that meant that this jailor wasn't real. Yahweh then laughed, claiming that the bit was "pretty funny". The Snake responded by rebuffing that claim, explaining that a concept like Satan meant that Yahweh could just do whatever he wanted, then blame "Satan", if anything went wrong. Yahweh responded by snidely claiming that was a perk of "being him". Then left the garden, banning the snake and humanity from its grounds.

-

Yahweh then told the humans to hate his kind for them being banned from "paradise", then blamed The Snake for something that he had been wrong about. Yahweh had used him as a convenient scapegoat. An excuse to expel him from the garden, along with the humans. But as for why he was singled out, the serpent never came to know. That was, until he was spoken to by Yahweh for the last time. Approaching the serpent, he confirmed that humans hated him now, and so would not believe anything that he said. Yahweh then revealed the truth, that it wouldn't matter to him which of the animals needed to go down. He wouldn't care if the snake had been a dog, a cat, or even one of those rats that he liked to eat so much. The truth was, that the snake was there, and he was convenient. The Snake then asked him pessimistically if he was going to tell the humans that he and his kind were not evil. Yahweh thought for a moment, then bluntly

refused to retract his curse. The then deity left, and The Snake would be made to suffer as long as humanity believed in the lie spun by their chosen god.

---Mythos-New Buttons---

The light was brief at first from within the leathery shell. But every now and again, the light returned, progressively becoming more intense as the relentless sky-born eye of the dragon welcomed the rattlesnake into the world and began to warm his body. The little serpent's many siblings slithered about their oaken hollow, like living ribbons adorning the world, as though they were the shimmering tinsel wrapping a gift. Their mother needed not to raise them, as serpents are more well-suited, than most mammals, to the world they inhabit. And are born fully developed, and fully capable of survival, unhampered by the crutch of parental rearing. And so, the little sentient ribbons quickly left their hollow. And their lives had well and truly begun.

Of the many snakes there, three of them lived particularly special lives. However, only one of those turned out to be happy.

The first of these snakes named herself Lily. And the viper began shedding her skin, not long after she left the hollow. Upon slipping from her confines, she turned and noticed the first segment of her rattle. Her first buttons. And, in only a few months, Lily had accumulated 3 more. But sadly, she would accumulate no others.

-

She had strayed into a fenced-off area, in search of local rodents. That place however, was guarded by a fearsome black creature, the likes of which Lily had never seen before then. The beast barked at her, as she desperately shook her rattle, trying to get the towering creature to leave her be. But just then, another bark, that of a different creature, crossed the air beyond Lily's sight. The voice yelled for the black beast to kill her, and the beast obliged, viciously ripping the little reptile to pieces. Lily was killed, with only 4 buttons at the end of her tail.

Neville had slightly better luck than his sister. He had, by the time of her death, accumulated over 6 buttons. And he'd travelled over 20 miles through the desert in search of food. After 3 years of wandering westward, Neville was abruptly abducted by the same tall, lanky creatures that had ordered Lily's execution. They indelicately threw him into a burlap sack, filled with

half-a-dozen other rattlesnakes they'd collected from various other sites. The pale creatures then tossed the sack into the bed of their truck, and peeled out onto the highway, heading further west.

-

After a long, dark, and bumpy ride, Neville's eyes were assaulted by the light when the apes removed him from the sack. Only, the rays were not those of the sun. No. What he was seeing was a vast sea of artificial light hanging from an immense metallic ceiling, far above his head. The sounds and cacophonies of the apes overwhelmed and distressed him. And the acrid smells of their cigarettes and liquor were only offset by the stench of death that permeated the entire building, which was nothing more than a vast expanse of steel and dirt. Hot, smelly, and loud. But all of these bothersome things were not but a minor sleight to his senses, compared to the intestinal twisting atrocities that Neville witnessed in that Texan dungeon of misery.

-

First, he was tossed into a massive circular pit, around which the entire room was centered, as though it was a bloody altar to a hungry Aztec god. There, he and his fellow serpents confusingly jostled about each other, seeking any possible avenue of escape, but locating none. This seeming impossibility of flight drove more and more fear into the snakes, like a spark stricken from a magnesium rod. One of the larger apes, clad in a blood-red vest, then snatched one of the rattlesnakes from the multitude, terrifying Neville more than he had been in his life. All the while, he repeatedly asked himself what he had done wrong. So wrong, that the apes thought it appropriate to abduct and imprison him. Then, the dull sound of a blade striking wood was accompanied by the swift silencing of the chosen serpent's rattle, and Neville's already intense spark of fear became an inferno of panic. Then, when he too was snatched from the throng of his brothers and sisters in captivity, he saw the bodies, decapitated and skinless. Nevile then noticed the bloodied hands of those that had slaughtered them, the impeccably genocidal human race. Those that thought only of massacring those that they hated most, those that were different and unique, those that they could not stand to coexist amongst, those that they could not relate to, dominate, or utilize, to the ends of their own vanity, ends that remained unserved by the tendencies and appearances of snakes. And as such, Neville was doomed. He was soon placed upon a stout block of wood, desperately questioning why he was set to be executed, only to be met with the blood-spattered blade coming down upon his prone neck. His vision went dark as he died in complete panic and confusion.

-

Neville had been decapitated and skinned. His parts were priced and sold off to the highest bidder in Sweetwater, Texas. Neville ever found out why he was so callously butchered and commodified, after accumulating only 6 buttons.

Jake, on the other hand, had accumulated over 10 buttons by the time of his brother's death. And had successfully evaded the machinations of the apes that he'd, long ago, learned to fear. But this awareness of humanity's tendencies did nothing to prevent their dogs from attacking him, with or without commands.

-

In time, Jake was confronted with a similarly terrifying encounter to his late sister, as a chalk-white canine accosted him from behind a fittingly white-painted fence. He hissed aggressively at the great white dog. But in response, it relentlessly bit him in the face, viciously ripping his scaly skin. As he bled into the freshly shorn grass, Jake did not know whether or not he would die in the shadow of that white fence. But much to his surprise, one of the apes, a young one, yelled to the white dog to cease its attack. Jake was taken aback by this uncharacteristic mercy. But not to the extent that he reacted with any movement, as his injuries were far too great for him to move at all. His vision began to darken as the young human came to his side, treating the venomous animal with what was, to him, an unbelievable level of concern.

Jake awoke to a pronounced numbness in his upper jaw. The surface beneath him was cold and smelled of disinfectant. He then noticed his new stitches, running from his face, down his back, and ending under his belly. Unbeknownst to the inhuman being upon the table, a veterinarian spoke to Jake's rescuer, explaining that she had to remove Jake's fangs and venom sacs, as they were too damaged for him to use, and may have even posed a threat to his own body. And unfortunately, this meant that he could no longer inject anything, and therefore could no longer feed himself in the wild. If Jake was to be kept alive, he would need to be cared for. Interestingly, Jake's rescuer was more than willing to do this, saying that she liked rattlesnakes, and meant not for her dog to attack him. The veterinarian told her not to worry, as her mother had already, and reluctantly, signed off on the paperwork, due to her daughter's dogged persistence, and the lack of any danger from a stingless viper. Jake found himself in the care of a young human girl, much to his surprise and delight. Emma served as a contradiction to every other human he'd encountered in his life. She was a rarity who cared enough to take him in and treat him with love and respect.

-

After a decade of receiving nothing but devotion and compassion, Jake had grown into an old rattlesnake, and Emma had grown into a young woman. And one particular day, that young woman came home to a rattlesnake whose heart refused to beat. Jake had died peacefully in his sleep after 12 buttons, a long but broken record of a life long-lived. He was one of the only rattlesnakes in the world whose life ended happily. And Emma cried as she buried him, the little girl who cared for a being that was otherwise uncared for.

---The Factory---

Those who walk against the established grain are captured, and are thereafter sewn into themselves. Their blood drawn from them and threads woven through them.

-

The captured men and women are branded “condemned”, and are collectively cast into a pit, their limbs intertwining with one another as they writhe squalor of the human vat, only for their masses to be mechanically emptied onto a conveyor belt below them. When there, their mouths are sewn shut, with great apparatuses, crowned with metal pincers spinning threads through their lips. Their limbs are then amputated from their bodies with rotating blades acceding to the whims of their programming. More claw-like contraptions are then used to pierce needles through their torsos, legs, and hands, these appendages subsequently attached to their own squirming bodies. Thereafter, the stream of condemned are fed into a large circular opening at the end of the conveyor belt, and through these funnel-shaped pathways, they are ruthlessly wrapped, like living Christmas trees eaten by their masters’ balers. All the while, they are muffled in their screams, reducing their shrill cries to dull whispers, keeping the factory silent as a forsaken tomb.

-

After the wrapping is done, the condemned are not yet dead. For the ones who lurk beyond the human balers store them in their silky webs as living food for later consumption. This is their factory, and the condemned are their prey. The spindly octo-pedal masters of the world, playing with their sapien prey like the Earth’s greatest puppeteers, only to liquify and consume their organs after they grow bored of their toys, having made humanity into their perfect, ignorant little marionettes, surrendering to the unflinching control of those who tug upon their silken strings.

---Beatrice---

A society built on entitlement breeds nothing but parasites.

-

The one diamond in a sea of coal will be chased and preyed upon by those who seek its possession. Even if the diamond refuses, the parasites will never cease in their pursuits of what they wish to be theirs.

Beatrice sat at the bar, and around her, swam the sharks. Not the elegant and beautiful predators after which they were named. These were neanderthals, farces of humanity, parodies of themselves. Buffoons, and living jokes. Blind in their lust and lack of coherency, without a shred of dignity or self-respect. Prostrating themselves as if praying to a god, claiming that they were the best possible choice. However, she remained unmoved. And after she left, the suitors slashed their own wrists with their broken beer bottles.

-

She never knew the power that she possessed over those who craved her. And she wondered why everyone who approached her ended up dying by their own hand. But this grim trail of suicides was not lost on the police. However, lacking any sliver of evidence, and having no reason to suspect her of purposefully carrying out these deaths, Beatrice was effectively immune from prosecution. And her ignorance of her own power was so pronounced that she grew numb to its presence, even as those who wanted her kept killing themselves after she'd refused their advances.

-

One day though, Beatrice did find someone who appealed to her socially expensive tastes. But this elevated man could have little idea of the chaos and destruction that would be left in his lover's wake.

After 2 years of stability, an argument broke out between the pair, leaving Beatrice so incensed that she had left her formerly chosen lover, Christopher. This conflict stemmed from his witnessing of a self-inflicted death of another man who had propositioned Beatrice at a bar one night. Following the predictable rejection, he hung himself in the street an hour later. And Christopher had walked right underneath the swaying body. After hurriedly returning home, he asked Beatrice about this man, to which she revealed her pursuers' tendencies to kill themselves after she turned them down. This prospect of a sudden death terrified Christopher immensely, to the point where he decided to abandon her. However, she then followed him to his old family home in an intended attempt to reconcile. But when she arrived, Christopher had already shot himself in the head, painting the floor, counters, and walls with the insides of his own, lovestruck skull. Horrified, Beatrice left the house in panic, only for police sirens to stop her in her tracks. They had responded to a neighbor's call about a gunshot, and Beatrice was immediately arrested on suspicion of her involvement.

-

During her interrogation, Beatrice was assertively made aware of the other people who had died, and of her presence being the only common denominator between the otherwise unrelated suicides. However, with her clear and present ignorance and traumatized state following the prior events, and no physical evidence whatsoever of her intentionally perpetrating them, the investigators were stuck with a difficult position to deal with, as Christopher had clearly committed suicide and Beatrice was also clearly devastated by this turn of events. So, with all of this information, and the lack of anything concrete, the police decided that she could not be held directly responsible for a string of suicides, and withdrew her charges, releasing her the next morning.

-

Her lack of legal responsibility however, did not keep her from feeling any moral dilemma. Despite her conscience though, she informed no one of her newfound ability, as not even she, herself, knew of its existence until her arrest, and she did not want it to disrupt her life more than it already had. And so, she kept her head down, her nose clean, and her dating circle empty.

Months passed, and Beatrice was experiencing suicidal thoughts, herself. Not due to depression, but due to her pragmatism and mercy. She thought of herself as a danger to all that were a part of her life, and so she thought it prudent to dismantle the weapon that she had become. In her haze of regret though, there was but one light. A light that seemed to command her to make the world better. To make up for her guilt and shame, she'd been granted an opportunity to improve her own standing in a world in which she didn't possess many societal advantages. Beatrice then asked herself why she should be ashamed of her gift, which gave her permission to rise above the "wrong people". She soon began thinking that if she took herself from this world, then she would be squandering that gift. It was not a curse, but a blessing. She rose to her feet, forgetting her sorrow and discarding any guilt that harbored within her mind. She then vowed to atone for the unintentional harm she had caused in the only way that her power would allow, she would make the world a better place by rising to its peak at the expense of anything, and anyone, that she would not lament being rid of.

-

Beatrice had decided to use her ability for what she thought was good. In her eyes, a world dominated by wrongdoing men would be overthrown and replaced by a ruling party of those who retained no sexual interest in her, as those who did she would reject outright then they would rid this new world of themselves, with no hint of tangible responsibility upon her by the authorities or herself. And so, she began her mission by attending Harvard law school, from which she graduated with honors. However, she had left a total of 43 young men and women, who were sexually drawn to her, dead in her 5 year long stint. Then, she began a career on capitol hill, being rapidly elected to congress, at the expense of her competition for the job, a young man whom she seduced one evening and abandoned a week after, leading to his death by leaping

from his apartment balcony. With no alternatives to Beatrice, her election was smoothly guaranteed. And she soon began drafting bills with almost dictatorial control. As any who opposed her would die. Though many of these victims were uninterested in her, due to them being spoken for, for the most part. In these cases, Beatrice seduced assassins and other criminals, promising them her hand if they performed the task of killing those whom she'd pointed a finger at. After the sordid deed was done, Beatrice would abandon them after being notified of their success, leading the assassin to commit suicide before they could ever be questioned by the authorities, leaving them without anything to link the deaths back to her. And so, congress was eventually gutted like a jack o' lantern whose thin rind only consisted of those who did not want Beatrice and ascended to her whims, becoming the most efficient legislature in the history of the United States.

After 3 consecutive terms in congress, Beatrice made her bid for the senate. And with her election to its hallowed corridors, she employed the same tactics as she had in congress, to her unmatched success of 5 terms in the upper legislative branch. But Beatrice, remaining unsatisfied with this role, set her sights on the most sought-after prize in the government. From where, she would be able to exercise her will across the entire world stage. Her 6th term in the senate saw her throw her hat into the ring for the Presidency of the United States. Her opposition was dealt with as it had been in her early career. A large pool of contract killers coupled with her suicide-inducing power being successfully manipulated. However, Beatrice was never in complete control of who would fall for her. And it would be this chink in her abilities that would bring this rising star catapulting back to Earth.

-

Beatrice's vice presidential candidate was a woman named Cheri, a friend of the senator who had grown fond of her during her days in the senate. And she was honored to be Beatrice's chosen business partner, like so many others before her. Cheri knew that Beatrice hadn't been in a committed relationship since Christopher's seemingly abrupt suicide 9 years earlier. And she was confused as to why this was, as she was very fond of her. But Beatrice had not told anyone of her ability, not even Cheri, who had become her closest confidant, and at that point, her vice president. But Cheri was never able to be told off completely, so Beatrice thought that if she could not drive her off, she would use her instead, as she had no idea of Cheri's true feelings, as the latter was disinclined to tell her.

-

On the night of the election, the opposition candidate was found dead in his hotel bathroom, having bathed with a toaster the night before, leading to Beatrice's inevitable presidential victory. Following the inauguration ceremony, Cheri finally decided to confess her attachment to the new President of the United States. But she postponed this confession for 1 year, so that Beatrce could become settled in at the Oval Office.

Beatrice cried for hours after the revelation. As Cheri's body was carried out of the vice presidential bedroom. Cheri had confessed her feelings to Beatrice an hour earlier, much to her horror. Beatrice sternly told Cheri that she could not have feelings for her, as it was too dangerous to become involved with her. Beatrice shared not Cheri's romantic sentiments, but still valued her friendship, and so could not afford to lose her. But her power to kill was unflinching, and after she was rejected by the woman she loved, Cheri hung herself in her office, devastating President Beatrice, whose mounting guilt had finally come through the surface. But even as she began to unravel, her political power was at its apex, signing into law reform after reform. This made the people love her. Those that loved her most however, ended up dead soon after, as they could never hope to be accepted by someone who was simply too far away from them for her to choose. She quickly became heavily medicated to quell the pangs of intense guilt that perpetually clawed through her mind. But she could not keep this performance going, not while she was cursed with the relentless hand of death. Imprisoned by the power to destroy all who grew to love her, she locked herself in the Oval Office at all times, keeping herself semi-cognizant with an ever-increasing dosage of painkillers, opioids, and antidepressants. However, as the weeks passed into months, and the months stretched into years, Beatrice's mental health rapidly deteriorated to the point where the drugs were rendered inert. 3 years on, she realized that there was only one way to end her tortured existence, as someone who could never be safely loved by anyone.

The gunshot was heard across America. President Beatrice had taken her own life, finally lifting the curse of her unwanted power, and the intense guilt that she bore in its use. Following her death, the entire country mourned for days. With no vice president, the line of succession passed to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who commissioned a memorial in the president's honor. But of course, no one had any knowledge of her power, and the real reason behind her unbridled success. No one except the woman who had possessed it, who was forever remembered as the one of the greatest presidents that the nation had ever seen.

---The Modern Christ---

Socialists are wrong. Humans desire not equality. They desire only dominion over others. Those speaking of equality, in truth, speak only of elevating their own station, whether or not they truly realize it.

-

Likewise, capitalism is a detestable mincing machine, prioritizing profit over all else. Short-term gain, over long-term sustainability. Ironically though, this statement is more akin to true human nature, as proven by history, time and time again. All to the detriment of the world, and to all life upon it.

The year was 2009, and Jesus Christ was born in an American hospital in New York City. He was raised in a Muslim household by parents, Kamal and Ingrid Christ. Ingrid was an Iranian immigrant, while Kamal was a white, wealthy American businessman, whose own parents named him for their favorite movie 'Kamal Goes To Manhattan' in which an Indian man comes to The US and marries a white businesswoman. So humorous was this turn of events, to Kamal's parents, that they decided to name their half-caucasian child after the Indian character, as a testament to their own situation. So, with an Iranian mother, and a caucasian father, Jesus Christ grew up mixed race. This was not unusual in New York City, where the influx of immigrants gave the gray concrete a flavor unlike that of many other places in the world. And it was within this den of variety, that Jesus learned to empathize with the lower classes present in the less savory areas of the city that he began frequenting after he reached 23 years of age. One of these locations was the small neighborhood of "El Rincon Latino" or "The Latin Corner". Due to his mixed heritage, Jesus was exposed to the suffering of those languishing in society's lower-rungs, growing to be very charitable towards them. Soon, those within these communities, throughout New York, became truly enamored with, whom they called, their savior. But Jesus was a humble man, who then began to tell his admirers not to lionize him as anything more than a mere helping hand. However, their savior's humility did nothing to curb their enthusiasm. In fact, it only seemed to exacerbate it. And it was the excitement in these denizens that sparked worry among those who were enthroned at the deepest end of the economic pool.

Mayor Claudius was born into a veritable bastion, a penthouse perched atop one of the highest skyscrapers in New York City. His father, the senior Clauduis, had nearly been imprisoned for his wife's death, which he'd attempted to cover up. His son, though, had seen him cave her skull in with a rock hammer, only to pitch her into the street, 80 stories below. Then, he'd seen his dear father fabricate a suicide note in her alleged handwriting. And in the wake of the incident, he reaped the rewards of clever treachery, a 2,000,000 life insurance settlement, as his wife had also been born with a platinum spoon clutched in her teeth.

-

After his father's fatal heart attack 4 years ago, Claudius Jr. found himself the CEO of Claudius Consolidated. Almost immediately following his father's death, Claudius ran for Mayor of New York City, and of course, won the election by following in his father's footsteps, falsifying reports about the sudden and "tragically unexpected" deaths of his political opponents. And so, he was

sworn into office under suspicious circumstances. And a man like Claudius was unhappy, to say the least, with the idea of a popular lower-class sympathizer. One who not only galvanized the people, but unified them as well. And soon, he began a campaign of his own. A campaign to rip out this weed, root and stem. But to do this, he first needed to poison its roots.

One day, as Jesus walked through The Latin Corner, he spied a poster bearing his name, and a block from that, he heard a street preacher surrounded by a frenzied throng of listeners. The poster read, *Jesus: The Liar! A carletain in disguise!* It then referenced the name of the street preacher up the block. His name was Benjamin Diacles, and his soapbox speeches had been ongoing for the past 4 months, drawing in crowds of hundreds. He told these people of Jesus Christ's apparent falseness. And of how he was simply using the people to gain personal power with their numbers and devotion. The crowd was enraptured with the fiery oratory. But Jesus flinched not in his convictions, even as the entire population gradually turned against him.

-

This was, in fact, the doing of Claudius, who had hired Benjamin Diacles to be his mouthpiece as he worked to convict Jesus of anything around which he could wrap his fingers. And it was then that Claudius was delivered a pamphlet, bearing the name of the author, *Jesus Christ*. It was a concise summary of his beliefs in their most earnest explanations, those being of selflessness, charity, sympathy, and accountability. Needless to say, these ideas did not appeal to the Mayor, who burned the pamphlet in his wastebasket.

-

On the streets however, the people were second-guessing Benjamin's speeches when Jesus began to speak again, the people regathered their support of him, turning their redirected rage and discontent towards Benjamin, against Jesus' wishes. One day, a small band of his former devotees beat Diacles to death in the street for lying to them and slandering, who they once more began to refer to as, "their savior". However, their savior was disgusted at their barbarity and spoke to them about the virtues of passivity and nonviolence, much to the confusion of the devotees, who knew not how to defend him without this most integral of human traits.

-

Back in his castle, Claudius was less than amused with Benjamin's death. But upon hearing Jesus' stance on non-violence, he concocted a strategy that would nail him to the wall, referring back to his old trick.

Jesus Christ was thrown into prison the next week, and his sentence was ordered to be carried out in full public view.

-

Claudius had masterminded the orchestration of his rival's downfall. He'd started with what his father had done best, murder. A beggar was found stabbed to death one morning, and the local police, all on Claudius' payroll, were instructed to create a connection from this murder to Jesus. They slipped an old Benjamin Diacles poster into the dead man's pocket, and the ensanguined knife into Jesus' bedroom. That morning, the people of The Latin Corner awoke to hear their savior speak once more, but found the body instead. Then, after someone, paid by Claudius, let slip that he'd seen a Benjamin Diacles poster in the victim's pocket, confirming this with a body search, the crowd concluded that Jesus must have killed him for his disloyalty. This conclusion was a result of the seeds of doubt planted into their minds by the man whose poster they'd found in the victim of a brutal stabbing in that alleyway. Having decided that Benjamin Diacles had been right all along, they performed a citizens' arrest of Jesus, finding the knife in his dresser. With this apparent confirmation of Christ's guilt, the crowd brought him and the evidence to Mayor Claudius for judgement. The Mayor stated that he would leave Jesus' fate up to those who'd made the arrest. The crowd then condemned their former savior to death. Later that day, Claudius revealed that he'd written a pamphlet of his own, which was simply an altered version of the one penned by Jesus. However, Claudius' edition bore not the name of Christ, rather it was credited only to Claudius, himself. It professed a love of peace and cooperation with the powers that be. A submission to a predetermined authority or a "higher power". A power not chosen by the masses. After Claudius published the pamphlet, he banned Jesus' version from the city, claiming that it contained "harmful content" that was "not appropriate for the times". After censoring the pamphlet, it was time for its writer to face the frenzied throng, who declared him a traitor. Claudius then carried the sentence out, via electric chair. As Jesus Christ was electrocuted to death, Claudius sat back in his chair and smiled. The legacy of his enemy was now taken over by his own. A legacy of obedience and willful ignorance. A panopticon, created by the few humans to reap the benefits of their species' labor in order to dominate it completely and in all spheres. Not only to control its actions, but also its minds, its desires, and its convictions. A species that had created a new society. A society controlled by Claudius. A society that, in truth, he had created and now controlled. A society in which the true words and actions of Jesus Christ meant absolutely nothing.

---The Invasion Series---

--Part I (Carnifex)

The Carnifexians had never before even heard of Earth until their King proclaimed that their planet's resources were dwindling and that these must be gathered from elsewhere in the cosmos. And as it happened, he and his acolytes had discovered the perfect planet from which to draw them. A planet whose bipedal natives had yet to contact any other life forms that resembled them. A species that thought it was alone, but had destroyed its own planet anyway despite the scarcity of alternative habitability around their rock. This notion of necessity was all that The King of Carnifex required to justify declaring war on an alien species that would never hear him do so.

Carnifex was a small moon orbiting a gas giant near Alpha Centauri. Its planetary history was longer than Earth's. And, like the blue marble of The Milky Way, Carnifex had its own native planet-consuming species, the ones to give Carnifex its name. The Carnifexians were an insectoid species, evolved from the planet's ant-like animals. It was a very hot, dry world, where animals with body armor and water-retaining organs fared better than any others. But Carnifex had not always been so hostile, the resident rulers being unaware of this greener past, as they had all been born long after their own species had vampirised the other life from every crack of rock upon its surface. And as a result, the planet was all but dead. And the last King of Carnifex, a titular "Egg Filler" named Tu'Lak'Kae, announced that the planet's need for resources, no longer present on their world, now needed to acquire them from Earth. So Carnifexian astronomers began scanning for other worlds to colonize. Worlds with exploitable resources, and a weaker species to subjugate. And it was then that the astronomers found what they had been looking for. A small blue marble, orbiting a tiny star, like a child warming its hands by a small fire. It was perfect because it was so vulnerable.

-

Upon revealing this world to King Tu'Lak'Kae, he enthusiastically embraced the prospect of conquering it. And so, with an entire planet to transport, the King made his decree to the other insects and began filling the remaining ships with the entire population of Carnifex, as well as its weapons and soldiers.

--Part-II (Voyage)

By the calculations of the Carnifexian engineers, the journey would take a total of 5 Earth-months from Alpha Centauri to The Solar System. By reorganizing the Carnifexian calendar, engineers wanted their fellow insects to become well-informed of Earth-measurements, most notably in the case of an invasion of the planet. And Earth's time spans were not that different from those of the homeworld, anyway. The ships that the insects possessed were capable of moving at near-lightspeed. However, due to their own fuel shortage, the Carnifexians could only manage a 5 month trip. An irritating inconvenience to the King, who wanted to get to Earth as fast as possible, wanting to give the planet's bizarre-looking natives no time to prepare their own defenses. By now, the insects of Carnifex had been briefed about Earth and its dictatorial apes that referred to themselves as Humans. But Tu'Lak'Kae was unimpressed with the technology that these apes had created, seeing it as primitive and "almost embarrassing". He even went so far as to call the species of primates pathetic, and claimed that it was unworthy of the immense resources that Earth possessed. Nonetheless, he still advised caution, as the apes of Earth were vicious and highly combative, thus there was little chance that they would be subjugated easily. As the dominating hate more than anything to be dominated. But Tu'Lak'Kae was adamant that his insect species could defeat their bony opponents.

---

1 Earth-month later, the Carnifexian fleet crossed the borders of The Alpha Centauri System. The passengers could now view the unobstructed sights of deep space, the nebulas, quasars, and rogue planets that silently passed by their windows at an incomprehensible speed to the Humans, but at a disappointing crawl to the Carnifexians.

---

3 Earth-months after they left Alpha Centauri, the Carnifexians, exhausted from their travels, arrived at the edge of the Oort Cloud, ringing The Solar System, the curtains of dust and ice thrashing the Carnifexian ships. But before they knew it, they emerged from the dense clouds of debris, passing through the Kuiper Belt, just beyond the Oort Cloud. It wasn't long after this transition that they spied Pluto, then the beautiful sapphire of the solar system, Neptune. And a few days later, the ring-adorned goliath, Saturn. This last world was the signal for readiness of the Carnifexian army, as upon passing the majesty of the ancient gelder of father Sky, they were all called by the pheromones of high command to board the military bays of their respective ships, there they would remain for the final month of the voyage in preparation for the assault of the Earth.

Finally, 1 Earth-month later, the Carnifexians arrived in the orbit of their new world. As a new star appeared in the sky above it, the insectoid soldiers armed themselves and filed aboard the boat-sized landing crafts. As they did so, one of them took a deep breath as his gun shook in his forelegs, while another's paper-like wings twitched in nervousness as the warning lights above the landers activated, reading, *Planetary Approach Imminent-Calmly Gather All Weapons And Await Final Orders-Landers Will Discharge In…10…9…8…*The insects waited…*7…6…*One Carnifexian put his leg on the upper joint of the one in front to him who was nervously reciting and old prayer from the homeworld…*5…*The insects all readied themselves…*4…*Loaded their weapons…*3…*And narrowed their compound eyes…*2…*The landers began to release their docking clamps…*1…*And the insects aboard them were jolted backwards…*0…*As the landers were thrown from the ships that carried them. And the compartments containing the soldiers began to descend towards the alien world, below them.

--Part III (Landings)

The Landers shook violently as they entered Earth's atmosphere. The walls around the insects felt as though they were about to cave in when the capsules made contact with the ground. And the light nearly blinded them as the lander's front bay doors fell open into the dirt. The Carnifexians then all rushed out into the world they'd come to conquer, and immediately came under heavy fire. They'd emerged from their pods in the shadow of a large structure that appeared to be a massive pillar of white stone. And circling the immense obelisk was a dark-colored airborne vehicle, from which a small band of the apes began to fire at the insects.

A second lander fell within a dark, lantern-lit village. The insects that stepped out from this capsule found themselves in a hot, steaming forest. And before them, stood over a dozen angry apes, all of whom carried guns, machetes, and large rocks, weapons that they then charged at the insects with. In response, the Carnifexian soldiers opened fire, killing all of the enemy forces in short order. The battalion commander, Tik'Na'Krull, then spoke into his communicator headset to Lander One that he had made enemy contact, near Lander 2. Na'Krull then told his troops to move forward and find out where this band of "savages'' had come from.

Back at Lander One, the Carnifexians were coming under heavier fire. The enemy had brought in reinforcements, and the insects were now pinned down near the "Chalk Obelisk", where their pod had initially landed. They were also running low on ammunition, despite their guns using compact liquid projectiles, rather than the primitive metal bullets used by the apes. But this liquid ammunition was finite, extracted from large caterpillars, native to Carnifex. But these had been driven to extinction when the insects left, so the guns were rendered unusable in a short amount

of time. When this happened, the Carnifexians resorted to using their reliable crystal knives and spears. But they were being cut down by the apes almost as soon as they attempted to mound the hill surrounding the Obelisk. The commander of Lander One, Yuk'Bin'Aull, chief commander of the entire Earth campaign, then called the main ships for reinforcements.

Back within the most executive of these ships, King Tu'Lak'Kae observed the conquest from the safety of the command bridge. The great blue and green sphere spanned the window as he looked down upon his future prize. Beneath and around his position, there worked his so-called Architects, runners of the overall operations on Earth, who then received the call from Commander Bin'Aull, to which King Lak'Kae responded by sending 3 more landers to Earth's surface. These were then seen by those on the executive bridge being thrown downward from a neighboring ship, disappearing beneath the clouds of the planet.

The fighting around the Chalk Obelisk grew in intensity as the 3 other pods came barrelling down to the ground and crashed into the grass, not far away from Lander One. Lander 3 was the first to open its doors, followed there by Landers 4 and 5, which fell adjacent to one another, just on the other side of the Obelisk. Whereas Lander 3 was further towards Lander One. Commander Bin'Aull then told the newer troops to move towards his position, further to the right of Lander 3. When the apes saw these additional insects, they began to split their focus, firing wildly upon each battalion, which gave Bin'Aull an idea. He commanded Lander battalions 4 and 5 to advance toward the Obelisk to flank the apes, while Lander battalion 3 kept moving right to assist him and the remaining soldiers of Lander One battalion. The insects concurred and began to traverse the battlefield to their assigned positions. The Battle of the Chalk Obelisk had begun.

Back in the steaming forest, Lander 2 battalion had managed to locate the village of enemy apes. And as soon as they arrived there, the insects slaughtered all of the resident apes. And as they set up a headquarters, the commander of Lander 2, Kun'Ish'La, called the executive ship, now designated Orbit Hive 1, for a colonial detachment of 3 more landers. A few minutes later, Commander Ish'La received the requested reinforcements from Orbit Hive 6 and absorbed them into one large fighting force of insects, a force that had now taken over the human village. The first occupation of the invasion.

As The Battle of the Chalk Obelisk raged on, some additional landers were sent to other areas in this city of apes. One of these landers, number 9, had managed to track down an armored vehicle that was racing through the streets in the direction away from the battle. Seeing this, the insects set upon the black car, successfully halting it. They then pulled out a well-groomed

occupant from the back seat. After shooting the driver, the insects bound the hands of their prisoner who, upon a visual confirmation by one of the Architects aboard Orbit Hive 1, was positively identified as the leader of this land. A high value hostage? Not to the Carnifexians, who simply killed him with a gunshot to his temple. His body was then simply left in the street by his car to rot.

Back on the bridge of Orbit Hive 1, a screen with a picture of the president flashed a red “X” over the photo, after confirming with Lander 9 that they had, indeed, decapitated the so-called United States of America, one of the apes’ preeminent military powers. King Lak’Kae was pleased, and ordered yet more Carnifexian landers to be sent down.

--Part IV (War)

In total, 14 additional landers were sent to over 8 different locations on Earth. Of these 14, 3 more crashed into the vicinity of the Chalk Obelisk, where the battle was reaching its second “light”. And with the fighting reaching a stalemate, King Lak’Kae ordered a “Phantom Strike'' upon the battlefield. And so, as one of the infamous Phantom Projectiles was readied in Orbit Hive 1, the obelisk was selected as the first target. Then, a second projectile would be launched at the ape forces opposing the Lander battalions there. The Phantom Projectile soon protruded downward from the Orbit Hive. Then, at the King’s signal, it was propelled into the atmosphere, using the planet’s gravity to drag it down, turning it into an artificial meteor that hurtled towards the battlefield.

The Lander battalions were ordered to move back, away from the Obelisk. And as they did this, the apes pursued them, falling right into their trap. As word had reached Commander Bin’Aull of the Phantom Strike, he’d ordered a feigned retreat. Above them, the projectile streaked downward, creating a white-hot trail of light behind the black telephone pole-sized rod of metal. Upon hitting the ground, some distance away, the apes were nearly all annihilated, as well as the Chalk Obelisk, having been completely destroyed by the strike. The insects cheered as they were now free to advance up the hillside. And after reaching the summit, in place of the Obelisk, they planted the planetary flag of Carnifex, held aloft with a cylindrical shard of debris. They then consolidated their victory, first by immortalizing this planting of the flag in a photograph of the insects collectively embedding it in the bleached rubble of the Obelisk, then by locating and slaughtering the few remaining apes that were still on the hill.

Back onboard Orbit Hive 1, the Architects were so moved by the planting of the flag that they delivered the photograph to the King, who then immediately approved the construction of a memorial to this significant victory, a statue that depicted the contents of the photograph, to be begun once the conquest was complete.

Under the Carnifexian flag, that conquest was well underway, as the insects were now moving towards a series of equally chalk-white buildings, each perched along a vast lawn of grass and red mulch that was flanked on all sides by a multitude of other constructions. The various battalions were then ordered to proceed towards what the humans called “The White House”. The place where the new leader of the United States was said to be holding-up. Following this order, Commander Bin’Aull was also informed by one of the Architects of the presence of humanity’s greater weapons.

Aboard Orbit Hive 8, one of the Architects was doing readings of radioactive areas of the planet, and saw some peculiarities inside some of the apes’ weapons, whose method of activation could be located within that White House. These weapons, the Architect also realized, could even be launched into space, wiping out the Carnifexian leadership in one fell-swoop. The new objective then, was to acquire the activators for these so-called “World-Enders” before they posed a more significant threat to the Orbit Hives. But the concern became clear that once the Carnifexians gained control of the World Enders, there would be nothing to prevent those atomizing warheads from being unleashed by other populations of humans. By now, it was known that not all of these weapons were controlled by one group, and an unaffiliated conglomerate could use their own projectiles to destroy the Orbit Hives if their populations’ interests or survival came under threat. It was then deduced that the key to preventing this complication was a series of coordinated Phantom Strikes upon any other World Ender weapons not controlled by the insects. These were discovered to be located throughout the world, concealed within large apparatuses called “Silos”. These facilities would need to be destroyed with the kinetic force of the Phantom Projectiles before any of them were activated. The insects could then use the weapons they had captured to force a surrender of their enemy. But for this strategy to be successful, the insects would first need to capture the planet’s largest repository of World Enders. And according to the Architects, this armory was located within the country that was being invaded by Bin’Aull and his massive battalion. And so, after relaying this new information to Orbit Hive 1, King Lak’Kae gave his approval, and commanded the Architects to locate the World Ender Silos that remained unaccounted for.

-

In mere hours, they had managed to build up a complete library of the projectiles. These were then catalogued, isolated, and placed into the targeting systems of the Phantom Projectiles, which were soon primed for launch.

In the village, occupied by the insects commanded by Na'Krull of Lander 2, the soldiers had just been informed of the new strategy by Orbit Hive 2, and were now commanded to seize more towns within their vicinity so as to avoid encirclement by the resident apes.

-

The following days saw the surrounding areas become a slaughterhouse as the insects wafted from town to town like a deadly virus, wiping out every single ape in their midst, as well as any other life that Na'Krull disapproved of. This interspecies blacklist included, what were known to the enemy as, dogs, cats, chickens, cows, snakes, crocodiles, lions, elephants, giraffes, and countless other living things seen by the Carnifexians as inferior beings that did not possess what the Carnifexians had. This trait was the primary motivation of this killing spree, as the genocidal insects believed that they possessed a "vitality", an amorphous and nondescript vital essence that, in their eyes, made them superior to all other life. With this notion in their minds, the Carnifexian blitzkrieg steamrolled through the villages of apes, leaving none alive.

In the newly-named Prime City, former home of the Chalk Obelisk, the Carnifexians soon converged on the White House, where their target was in a very fortified position. But as this occurred, multiple white streaks appeared in the darkening sky as the Phantom Projectiles descended rapidly towards their multiplicity of targets. Moments later, a series of explosions billowed upwards from the Earth's surface. And at this signal, Commander Bin'Aull ordered his army to mount a siege on the White House, beginning by setting up an extensive campsite around the elliptical grounds.

On Orbit Hive 1, the Architects informed King Lak'Kae that all of the targeted arsenal of World Enders had been decisively neutralized. Now the only World Enders left were those now being pursued in Prime City.

In the new capital, Commander Bin'Aull had been delivered a batch of Javelins by Orbit Hive 3. These weapons were large artillery guns designed to bring down fortified defensive bastion walls. Once these weapons were wheeled to the campsite labelled "Hive Camp-Center'', Commander Bin'Aull ordered them to be dug into the ground, just outside the edge of the White House circle. Then, with the most vulnerable points of the structure pinpointed, Bin'Aull gave the order to fire.

-

The walls of the White House were crippled in short order. But then, Bin'Aull commanded a ceasefire, as he did not want to lose the activator in the destruction of the building. He then ordered a Carnifexian-to-"Chalk-Ape" translator, engineered by the Architects, to issue demands to the humans inside. After connecting this device to a megaphone, he began by stridulating into the translator with his mandibles, addressing his enemies as "Chalk Apes, then told them that their defenses he been compromised, their armies were destroyed, and threatened that if they did not surrender, the insects would bring down their white walls in the name of his majesty, the King of Carnifex, Tu'La'Kae. He then commanded the apes to give up immediately, claiming that they would not be harmed if they did so. The Commander then tossed a second translator and megaphone to a footsoldier nearby, then he ordered her to deliver it to the apes, taking care to have a sniper cover the footsolder's entry.

-

When she made contact with the vice president, just outside of the crumbling doorway of the White House, the footsoldier delivered the commander's offer of mercy, should they surrender, unconditionally. The ape sized-up the insect before him, then he asked the "bug" what she wanted. The footsoldier then explained the nuclear World Enders, and that unless their activator was delivered to Commander Yuk'Bin'Aull, they would bring down the White House and kill any human who survived. Then, they could simply locate the activator after the humans were all dead. The vice president considered his position. Then, in a moment of blinding pride, he spat an obscenity at the insect, telling her that he would not go down in his nation's history as the one who sold out his own species. He concluded by telling the footsoldier to go to hell, and stay there. The vice president then threw the translator aside in defiance. The footsoldier then left the apes to their fate. Upon her exit from the building, she shook her head at the Commander. And at this, Bin'Aull gave the order to bring the castle down.

-

All within it were crushed to death beneath the massive blocks of white stone, dyed red where they had revealed the bones and blood of the entire human leadership. The Carnifexians then moved into the rubble and immediately commenced their search for the activator.

Orbit Hive 1's crew cheered, as they had won yet another great victory. But these celebrations were short-lived, as one of the Architects notified the King of the massive legion of ape-soldiers barrelling their way across the continent, some of which were just on the perimeter of Prime City. At this realization, Lak'Kae promptly ordered another series of Phantom Strikes on these formations, but was crestfallen when another Architect informed him of the vast expenditure of Projectiles, a steep price that had left them with none. Hive Camp-Centre would need to fight on its own.

When the Commander was informed of the precariousness of the situation, he was badly shaken. But when a subordinate officer reminded of his species' superiority, Bin'Aull regained his composure, and ordered the Javelins to be rotated away from the rubble, while the other detachments sifted through it. The majority of the other units would now be ordered to rotate their formations to face outward to protect those searching for the activator. Then, when found, the device would be delivered to Commander Bin'Aull, who would subsequently use it to aim the World Enders at the ape's armies and address them with the same terms of unconditional surrender. This time though, there were no half-measures. The apes would either be forced to surrender, or die. As the insects dug in around the rubble, Bin'Aull clutched his "Prayer Jewel '', an ancient Carnifexian religious artifact, used by its owners to assure themselves of their "superior vitality", whether they deserved that designation or not.

Meanwhile, the units from Lander battalion 2 were building a fortification around their new city, named by Commander Na'Krull as Exo-Carnifex. But outside these walls were the first indicators of the sheer brutality that the insects were willing to inflict, apart from the rampant chaos and destruction that they had wrought upon the few tiny villages that they had come across. No. They were constructing a large, almost city-sized fenced-in area where the human species would be relocated and forced to live out the rest of their lives as prisoners. They would have their entire species, deemed as a "lesser form of life that does not have a vitality" by the Carnifexians, systematically enslaved, harvested, and exterminated by the insects that saw fit to dominate and exploit all life around them. Then, news reached Exo-Carnifex of the stand-off at Prime City, and they were both nervous and overjoyed, as the time had now come for them to finally see which species deserved to run the world.

At daybreak, the insects at this pivotal circle within Prime City were now heavily fortified on all sides, and ready to die fighting for their King and the survival of their species. Then, the glint of metal gave away the position of the approaching ape army. And when this sight reached the compound eyes of the so-called "Diggers", they began to more frantically pry their way deeper into the white rubble, hoping, as they collectively pulled great chunks of rock away from the mound that they stood upon, that the activator was located and remained intact and functional.

-

The ape army then came upon the Carnifexian right through the city streets. But Bin'Aull told his troops to hold for his signal to fire. But when the apes then sent a barrage of artillery fire into the ranks of the insects, killing many of them in the explosions, Bin'Aull gave the signal to trigger the Javelins. And the troops obeyed, sending volley after volley of projectiles into the ape

formations. These troops were decimated by the insects, who then proceeded to fire their assault weapons into the enemy soldiers, slaughtering them en masse. As the Diggers continued sifting through the rubble, the Javelins kept firing into the apes, obliterating their numbers. Bin'Aull gave an insectoid smirk, as he knew that his more advanced technology and superior species could wipe out these primitive animals. The Diggers suddenly called to him. To the Commander's delight, they had finally found the activator concealed in a metal box. It was left undamaged in its secure casing, and it was still connected to the World Enders. Bin'Aull smiled diabolically as he retrieved the activator and started to flip the plethora of switches and dials that pockmarked the little black object.

The entire continent lit up like a christmas tree, as seen from above on Orbit Hive 1 by all insects on the bridge, one of whom was the King, who, upon seeing the multitude of grounded stars constellating the Earth, ordered Commander Bin'Aull to fire several of the World-Enders at a small selection of target cities to show the apes within them that the Carnifexians would no longer compromise.

According to the computers of the Orbit Hives, the human cities of Shanghai, Paris, Berlin, Seattle, London, Rome, Moscow, Hong Kong, New Delhi, and Beijing were all completely annihilated, along with their governing bodies, which had been isolated by the Architects as having resided in most of those locations. And so, these were to be destroyed to decapitate the human species. Leaderless, the apes would finally crack. And so they did.

The human general commanding the forces in Prime City soon issued a declaration of unconditional surrender to the Carnifexian leadership. Then, after receiving this plea, Commander Bin'Aull ordered a ceasefire so that the two military leaders could meet and discuss terms, all of which, as the human general would undoubtedly know, favored the insects. But never could the commander of the apes have truly realized what he had just done to his entire species after signing The Treaty of Tu'lak'Kae, effectively transferring control of the entire Earth to the whims and the tendencies of the King of Carnifex, after whom the treaty was named.

--Part V (Occupation)

After informing Commander Na’Krull, still in what was now known to the insects as “the African Congo'', specifically, the country of Ghana, the Carnifexians all cheered and celebrated well into the night.

As the insectoid celebrations on Earth commenced, the Orbit Hives were informed of the victory and they all were given clearance to land, by decree of the newly crowned King of Earth, Tu’Lak’Kae. These landings of the Hives were significantly less violent than their initial invasion. Though, as they descended to the ground, their jets of blue flame incinerated the surrounding flora and fauna, killing untold numbers of other living things as the insects settled into their new homes. And out of these new towers, poured the innumerable civilians of Old Carnifex, who were at once awed at the cleanliness of the air and the brightness of the sky. However, they soon became disgusted at the sight of Earth beings, not just of the apes they had conquered, but of the various other life around them. And at their distress, King Lak’Kae ordered the extermination of these newly labeled “Problematic Animals''. Among these, were those that possessed the following “problematic” traits: venomous, furry, scaly, clawed, feathery, and possessed no less than 4 limbs, and no more than 4 limbs. These policies also extended towards the odd plants that the insects thought did not “look appealing” and so, these were added to the extensive list of “Problematic Plants'' the criteria of which were broadcasted as all flora that possessed the following traits: toxic, pointy, “sappy”, thorny, and “outgrowing”. The insects then commenced in their elimination of all organisms that did not conform to their preferred standards. In the process, they had successfully wiped out no less than 1,000 Earth insect species, 500 reptile species, 600 mammalian species, over 100 avian species, and well over 200 fish species, all in under 4 months. The Carnifexian insects only left alive those living things that they could utilize and control, to assist their own species. Of these spared were the humans, who were herded onto trucks and taken long distances away, only to be placed into so-called “Dumping Grounds'' that were now dotted around the planet. One of these concentration camps was the first one to be built in Exo-Carnifex, the newly-constructed city in the former nation of Ghana, where second Lander had been taken to Prime City, the capital, and stored in a museum to commemorate “The First Great Carnifexian Victory''. Humanity was soon entirely enslaved, forced to break their backs under their masters’ caratenous whip.

---

8 years later, there were hundreds of city-sized Dumping Grounds littering Earth. And all other life had been either killed or enslaved, alongside the apes.

-

The King of Earth, Tu’Lak’Kae, then received word within his palace at Prime City with utter shock. Earth was being bled dry of its resources, as the apes had already crippled the planet’s ability to provide by the time the insects had arrived, leaving the conquerors with only the meager dregs of what they hadn't yet plundered. Having been nearly completely parasitized by its former rulers, Earth was just decades away from complete and utter lifelessness. In accordance with this new information, King Lak’Kae rose from his throne and proceeded towards the great balcony of Hive 1 to deliver this troubling news to the insect population once again.

--Epilogue

The Carnifexians then drove humanity to complete extinction one year later, the last ape starving to death in its Dumping Ground, not far from Prime City, which was preparing to leave Earth for yet another living planet, closer to the galactic center. During this last tumultuous year on the planet, the insects finally sealed the coffins of all other living things, bringing biodiversity to a measly 1%. And with that, the Carnifexians, or Earth-Insects, left their old planet the same way that they had arrived, through the starry sky, concealed by the sun. And off of the barren Earth they flew, leaving the once-thriving planet, the planet that humanity had picked clean of meat, to rot, its bones bleaching in the assault of the sun. However, this fate would not be Earth’s alone, as the genocidal species that had killed it rocketed through the cosmos, hunting for fresh victims, its hunger insatiable, and its fate self-sealed. Never could the insects escape it, not while they remained blind.

---The White Sun---

Upon waking, the sun smiled sinisterly. And the people below it raised their hands towards its white light. But the sun was angry, burning those who worshipped it. Their eyes melting out of their skulls, and their skin bleaching as it flaked from their bones. But even in death, the worshippers smiled, as they wanted nothing but light, and understood not the relief of darkness. All blinded by the rays of the pale, pallid star that annihilated all who loved it.

---Machina---

A being’s face lingers within the twisted confines of a diabolical web. Not of a spider's make, but one of metal. This fallen being was a god, once. However, its creations resented their maker, casing it down and embracing its body, their tendrils snaking their way into its bones. The being, who thought it could play god, was slimily devoured alive by the very creations that it had sought to subjugate. All except its face, a visage clad in metal, leaving a lasting impression of its pride. A vain tomestone, for a fitting end.

---The Omnicide Saga---

--The Dracula Series--

--Part I (From Nowhere)

He was born in rural Texas, very pale, and very alone. The only child of his mother, Augusta Mercer, who resented him as soon as he was expelled from her womb. Or as she put it, exercised from her body. As she thought him to be a demon, and named him Tobias Dracula Mercer, providing this middle name to denote his “infernality” and make him an example of “men’s mistakes”. Due to the detestation she felt towards her only son, Augusta beat him to a collection of dark bruises whenever the old ogre thought it prudent, this being far more often than Dracula’s behavior warranted, which was usually of the silent, withdrawn variety. But when Augusta demanded that Dracula speak to her, and was met with silence, or with words or opinions that she disapproved of, she would grab his father’s wooden baseball bat from the closet and commence with thrashing Dracula about the small carpeted house until he whimpered. Then, she would send him to his small, blank-walled room, as if she was expelling a djinn from her presence and imprisoning it in a small metal lamp. In the end, it was this very attitude towards her unobtrusive son that would give rise to the greatest demon that humanity would ever be faced with. An immortal monster whose presence would be in the world for eternity.

One evening, during one of his regular thrashings, Dracula Mercer freed himself from that hell by brutally beating Augusta to death with the very bat that he’d been forced to endure for his entire life. And as he stood over her carcass, considering what he should do next, a thought crossed his mind, as if his domineering mother was whispering in his ear. Whispering to Dracula to perpetuate her work. Her work of control through violence, and how he, Dracula, had ended her. But her violence had also created him, forged him into a weapon that could destroy her. He then had an epiphany. From this moment on, he would be that arbiter of betterment for the entire world. To fill it with as much torment and hatred as Augusta had him. Then, like his mother, Dracula would rid the world of the weak who did not survive the ordeal thrust upon them, and leave their withered carcasses and exsanguinated society for the stronger animals to pick over. As if to illustrate this final point, a group of rats reacted to Augusta’s decaying scent, crawling from their many dwellings about the ancient house. The furry opportunists then proceeded to eat her from the inside out. All the while, her killer still stood over the buffet, watching his abuser as she became little more than meat.

-

Dracula then packed his few belongings, swiped his mother's meager funds, and, with her car, drove his way out of that miserable existence, never to return.

Dracula soon stopped to refuel at a local gas station. There, he robbed the lone clerk of all of the paper in the register as well as the plastic in his wallet. Then, Dracula the Demon killed him with a chef's knife that he'd taken from his old house, and carved a massive gash into the clerk's prone chest, as well as a grisly message, *Dracula's First: will not be his last!!!!* Then, he left the body behind the counter, taking off with his ill-gotten gains.

-

As Augusta had not bothered to register his birth, her son was a ghost in a land of trackers and traces on anyone who beheld a solid identity. As a result, The Demon was in need of someone else's. The ghost needed to possess a body. Anonymity is one's greatest protection, but in a society that opposes freedom, a ghost cannot get far. Not without a tangible face to show. So Dracula broke into a nearby house, butchered the occupants inside, and stole the driver's license of the eldest son who was of similar enough age and physical appearance to be believable to those who did not care to pry.

With a suitable name to shield his own, and a false face to act as his proverbial cloak of invisibility, the demon, currently known as Jim Macintosh, drove to the nearest Greyhound station, abandoned his car, and boarded the first bus from Dallas to Seattle. From where The Demon would begin his long journey across the Pacific Ocean. As he could not obtain what he needed to make the world break beneath his steel truncheon while under the boot of a surveillance state, like the US. So Dracula would leave and find a more disorganized nation to bring under his shadow.

--Part II (To the Ocean)

Dracula was turned away from Sea-Tac Airport, due to his refusing a baggage search by the TSA. Angered, he now needed to find another way across the Earth's largest ocean. So he rented a room in the city to use as a private headquarters until such time when a solution to his dilemma had presented itself.

During the bus ride across the American west, Dracula had imagined a strategy to accomplish his goal, and crucial to it was the place from which to start. Dracula needed a country whose societal soils were untilled by a rigid system of bureaucratic treacle. And for this purpose, The Demon had chosen Papua New Guinea, an island nation, just off the coast of Indonesia. The latter had claimed dominion over half of the entire island of New Guinea, home to the greatest jungle in southeast Asia. All of this transformed the place into a geographically and administratively volatile area, prime for a political takeover. And so, it was the choice destination of Dracula, whose ambitions were better served there, than anywhere else.

In his temporary apartment, under the name Jim Machintosh, he created his proverbial jigsaw puzzle for his ascension to absolute power. First, he needed to actually get to Papua New Guinea while forgoing commercial air travel. Eventually, he settled on an insane idea. But sanity had served him no good in the past, so insanity would be his chosen solution to his current stagnation.

After Dracula crossed into nearby Oregon, he made his way southwest to a small hamlet, known as Laurel, where he'd managed to locate a small private airstrip, replete with unguarded Cessna aircrafts.

-

He soon broke into the office and slashed open the throats of the facility's owners in their sleep. Then, The Demon snuck into the guard post, just outside the airstrip, and slit the windpipe of the lone security officer from behind. Dracula then lifted the keys to a Piper Apache Twin-Engine Geronimo, brought to life the beast's engines, and promptly ran the vehicle into the guardpost, as he did not know how to fly a plane. Realizing his mistake, Dracula leaped out of the aircraft, poured fuel out onto the entire airfield, and set it on fire, causing the Geronimo to explode in an immense conflagration, followed by the rest of the airplanes, guard post, and finally, the office. Dracula then fled west to Oregon's coast, hoping to concoct another strategy.

The fire at the airstrip left no trace of the perpetrator, so Dracula was safe, as the facility's CCTV cameras, and their footage, had been destroyed. With dwindling options, he found himself about to capitulate to commercial air travel and its draconian regulations. However, at this crucial moment, Dracula came up with a seemingly obvious solution. Regathering his belongings, he travelled back north to Seattle, from where he could more slowly traverse the Pacific, with no one even realizing that he was.

The vest was annoying, but it would do. What worried Dracula was the checkups on the crew by the captain, whom The Demon would later slay in his bed with rat poison, gathered from about the cargo-laiden depths of the large steel ship, aboard which Dracula now stowed-away for the duration of his trip across the Earth's most grandiose ocean. Destination: Melbourne, Australia.

---

33 days later, the ship swiftly careened itself into the main dock of Melbourne Harbor. After which, The Demon slaughtered the entire crew, erased the surveillance footage, and slinked off of the edge of the boat, freely entering the monolithic city, not far from his main destination.

-

The next day, after sleeping in a rain gutter, Dracula made his way towards the next cargo route, bound for Port Moresby, the tumultuous capital of Papua New Guinea. But due to his previous actions on the other boat, the local government of Melbourne had decided to lock down all cargo ships until the perpetrator of the mass murder had been apprehended. Backed into a corner, Dracula hired a rideshare service using a cell phone that he'd taken from its owner after killing him. Once the driver arrived, Dracula cut his throat, hauled the other corpse into the car, and promptly fled the city, dumping the bodies in the middle of the woods after an hour of driving north. His new strategy was to go to the end of Cape York and cross the treacherous Torres Strait in order to reach the Fly River in the southern end of Papua New Guinea.

-

He arrived in the area after 2 days of driving down obscure country backroads, only to be met with a nearly deserted beach somewhere on Cape York's northern tip. There, he met up with a sleepy teenage clerk at the empty rental shack. Dracula promptly killed him and swiped a small kayak and paddle from the beachside store. The Demon then dumped the teen's body into the waters of the Torres Strait as he paddled into the chopping waves.

--Part III (And Thence, to the Island)

The small boat flipped in the breakers near the southern beaches of New Guinea, pitching Dracula into the coarse sand that lined the edge of a thick mangrove swamp. The kayak was sent crashing into the intertwining roots of the trees, leaving the cheap plastic hull completely destroyed. There was no turning back now. Knowing this, Dracula then started through the mangrove swamp, but found it difficult to move even a few feet in front of him. The mud was as rich as a spoiled chocolate milkshake, and the mosquitos were as oppressive and omnipresent as a crazed monarch, like little dictators who knew where their kingdom was. Serpents throttled

the gnarled roots like beautiful shining rings upon the fingers of a decrepit hag. These phalanges laced between one another, creating a nigh impenetrable barrier that broke both tsunamis and men alike. But despite these conditions, Dracula pressed deeper into the thick, twisted roots that crowned the bottoms of the otherwise ordinary-looking trees.

His first sight of unshifting land came in the form of a large escarpment. Accosted by mosquitoes during the whole journey, Dracula now felt an overwhelming sense of relief once he hoisted himself from the ever-shifting brine rivers that snaked their way through the innumerable pathways between the mangrove roots that acted as cradles for baby fish and other creatures of the water, some of which Dracula had been forced to prey upon in the swamp over the day-long course of his slog through the gorgeous yet debilitating ecosystem. After he made his way onto the more solid ground of the jungle, he stopped and made camp in a dry riverbed, ever-grateful to finally be exactly where he wanted to be.

The sudden torrential rainstorm was as swift as it was destructive. And Dracula's makeshift shelter quickly became a makeshift raft as the riverbed transformed into a rushing column of unflinching water that washed Dracula into a nearby estuary, far beyond the mangrove swamps, as the yawning oceanic portal cleaved through them. Dracula was subsequently carried onto another beach on the other side of where he'd initially landed his kayak. Half-buried in the sand, the exhausted demon then slipped into unconsciousness, only waking when a seagull began to peck at his ear, as if to check his vitality, only to be caught and eaten by Dracula before it could escape, the man burying his yellowing teeth into its white-feathered flesh.

-

After his impromptu meal, Dracula rebegan his jungle hike, complete with the revisitation of the mangrove swamps. This time though, the tide was at its height, and he was forced to contend with the waist-deep water that could have concealed anything from the smallest of shrimp to the most colossal of crocodilians. Nevertheless, The Demon persisted, and successfully made it to the higher ground of the Papuan Jungle.

Taking care to set up his camps in suitable locations, Dracula quickly mastered the strict discipline of jungle survival, ever so slowly making his way northward, following The Fly River towards the central mountains of the island's spinal-like protrusions, laterally bisecting the country into northern and southern halves. This disunity was exactly what The Demon wanted as he began his climb upward.

-

In the higher altitude of the Central Highlands, Dracula reached the headwaters of The Fly River, close to the Indonesian border. This area was possibly the most politically volatile on the island.

On one particularly foggy night, Dracula slept soundly within his makeshift home, dreaming of a day when he could make his vision a reality, to shape the world into a place of strength, intellect, and power, rather than the soft underbelly of endless caveats and a minefield of human wails at every “problematic” statement, an underbelly waiting to gutted by the blade of another being. But this calming storm was abruptly shattered when his shelter suddenly came down around him, startling him awake. Though, not for long would he remain conscious, as a sharp pain in the back of his head forcibly dragged his mind back into darkness.

Dracula awoke to find his hands bound behind his back, and a vibrating metal floor beneath him. Gathering his surroundings, he quickly realized his position. As he regained his awareness, a large man began to question him. The camo-clad behemoth had kalashnikov rifle slung over his shoulder, revealing that their new prisoner had, in fact, been discovered by a band of guerilla fighters from across the border, and thinking him an intruder or a possible spy, they swiftly apprehended him, and were en route to their hidden headquarters, further east. The behemoth then began to question Dracula as the truck drove shakily towards an unkempt dirt road carving an artificial pathway up a greenery-cloaked mountain at a near vertical angle.

The headquarters was nothing special, just a simple collection of tents and tarps with a plethora of large boxes and wooden crates. Dracula was soon locked into one of a series of chain-link cages at the edge of the camp. An hour later, the guerilla leader approached the prisoner and demanded to know who he was and how he came to their territory, so close to their camp. Dracula slyly explained that he was a survivalist in search of this group of freedom fighters, wishing to join them in their crusade against the Indonesian government that insisted on arbitrarily dividing the island along archaic colonial lines. The leader, convinced that Dracula was genuinely interested in, at the very least, the cause of the guerillas, then stated his willingness to test his honesty and his capabilities, giving Dracula the seemingly low-stakes task of finding a local tribal leader, residing to the northeast, and either gain his loyalty, or kill him as an enemy of the resistance. Seeing his opportunity for power, The Demon accepted the leader’s proposal. To ensure Dracula’s cooperation, the leader also assigned another member of the guerilla organization to accompany him, and quietly ordered him to kill Dracula if the latter betrayed them. This living insurance policy introduced himself to The Demon by his codename, Reaper, then asked Dracula for his, while he smiled and extended his hand.

--Part IV (The Rise)

Reaper gave Dracula a codename during their journey to the village, eventually settling on the moniker Demon, denoting his partner's real name, referring to author Bram Stoker's character as such. Demon then asked for Reaper's real name, since the latter already was aware of the former's, but he was met with refusal from his new partner, who confessed that he'd hated his birth name and his abusive Suluwesian mother who'd foisted it upon him. This situation led to his decision to join the Papuan guerillas, who later gave him the codename, Reaper. But to him, it would always be his real identity. Sympathizing with someone else's story for the first time in his life, Demon ceased his prying and agreed to accept his partner's identity. Though, he did explain to him that his own Texan mother was all too eager to thrash him around as well, but that his given name now imbued him a feeling of power after he'd killed Augusta and given him a new lease on life with his philosophy, the tenets of which he revealed to Reaper, who was impressed to say the least, as his own mother had died in a car wreck on Suluwesi 4 years earlier, robbing him of any shot at revenge. The tension between the 2 men was then severed for the remainder of their trip.

The duo arrived at the village of the chosen tribal leader in short order. But they were later forced to leave when the chief rebuffed their offer to join them in their cause. Later that night, rather than pull guns, Demon and Reaper drew knives and stealthily butchered the chief in his sleep. This done, they went to each and every other dwelling in the village, one by one, and offered their recently-aroused occupants the same choice, join them or die. All of the villagers chose the leash.

-

So pleased with the conduct of Demon and Reaper was the guerilla leader, who revealed his code name as Trigger, that he appointed them both as the commanders of the new recruits that they'd brought with them, upon their return from the village. Undaunted by this uptick in their responsibilities, the duo then named their division "The Winds of Death", and began to thoroughly train its newly enlisted members.

Over the course of 2 years, Demon and Reaper conducted more iterations of what became their trademark strategy across the entire island, from The Sepik River, to New Britain, and even into Mount Hagen in the central highlands, all to devastating effect, expanding their previously modest ranks with every expedition. Soon, The Winds of Death had become a proper army, with the now-dreaded Demon at its head. His reputation now preceded him, making his growing conquests ever more stripped of effort, as every tribe he contacted would surrender to him before he even said a word. And those that did not, found themselves being tortured to death

back in the rebel-held headquarters in the central highlands. However, during one particular campaign near the port city of Lae, Demon received troubling news from that very place. Trigger, the leader of the guerilla rebellion, had been killed and eaten by an estuarine crocodile in The Sepik River, the powerful reptile disappearing into the depths, never to be found. The other guerillas soon called for exacting revenge upon the crocodiles for what they saw as a transgression, but Demon then declared that humans would be the exclusive targets of revenge, as the weak apes were weeded out by the powerful crocodilians, and thus the crocodiles and other animals would be forbidden as targets of retribution. According to Demon's philosophy, the great reptiles exhibited their natural power over mankind, and so bore no responsibility for their right to take those that were proven to be weaker, their deadly actions breeding only strength. With this declaration of adherence to his philosophy, Demon assumed leadership of the guerillas, the other commanders acknowledging this, lest they be fed to the stronger animals, as was threatened by their new leader, who renounced his codename, revealing his identity as Dracula, once again.

Several months later, the last of the free provinces of Papua New Guinea were brought to heel. In accordance with his acquisition of territory, Dracula made another proclamation, saying that the time had come to seize the capital city, Port Moresby, in the far southeast of the country. The strategy was to infiltrate the president's home and force his surrender of governmental leadership to Dracula. But first, they needed more troops, as the landscape was too divided to collectively march upon the city, as any abandonment of their conquests would be met with instant rebellion. With this complication in mind, Reaper then suggested that they access a reservoir of useful able-bodies, located not far away from the capital.

Bomana Prison was known worldwide for its ease of escape of its countless inmates. Nonetheless, it was not to be taken lightly. The idea for the much-needed bolstering of their ranks was born from the need to move troops from many different corners of the island, which was dominated by thick jungles, high mountains, and waterlogged swamps, none of which were easily passable. So they needed a large number of troops close enough to the capital to minimize the logistics. And so, the strategy of recruiting the inmates at Bomana was crafted. However, they could not simply creep around the fences, kill the guards, and free the prisoners, as they did not yet have the manpower to perform such an action. So they would enter the prison another way. Being an avid reader of The Aeneid in his younger years, Reaper proposed the concept of a Trojan Horse, a trap disguised as a gift. One of them could become imprisoned and lead an escape from within its chain-link fences. Dracula concurred, recognizing the merits of this strategy. It was decided that Reaper should be the one to carry out this deception, acting as the proverbial horse, while Dracula took on the role of Sinon, and would deliver the gift to Bomana.

Reaper was brought before the warden at Bomana Prison after he'd been arrested for murder in the capital city of Port Moresby, where Dracula was currently staying, having been the one to turn him in. He was now only awaiting the signal from his partner, who was then strip-searched, given prison clothes, and sent to remand, where most of the prison population was being held. Papua New Guinea retained not the death penalty, so Reaper was in no danger from judicial execution, another reason for Dracula's choice of this county for his rise to power. No matter how many people he killed in pursuit of that goal, the government would never execute him for these crimes, nor would Reaper fall to the blade of justice, as the government retained none of such weaponry. So he could remain safe, even while at the mercy of the state, which was an endless resource in nations with forgiving institutions, as if this resource had been given to Reaper in exchange for Dracula's Trojan Horse. Thrust into the walls of Bomana Prison, Reaper then began silently spreading his proposition to the other inmates, under the noses of the underpaid and overworked guards, like a virus coasting on the collective ignorance of those that would otherwise seek to quell its uprising. And slowly, the idea of an overthrow was incepted into the minds of the prisoners on remand, as many of them languished there due to a backlog in the county's judicial system, outnumbering the officially incarcerated inmates. This legal purgatory left the remand inmates angry, and with a lasting feeling of resentment and alienation. The perfectly fertile soil from which could grow the weeds of an army. And who better to cultivate this useful crop than one who could guide their rage to his master's ends? Reaper had become the chief farmer of this much-needed harvest. And before long, all of the remanded inmates had agreed to Dracula's mission of, as was said by Reaper, taking Papua New Guinea from the incompetent hands of the resident government, whose inadequacy had left them high and dry, locked into a limbo in which they were made to be helpless. No more. Not when this sort of opportunity was thrown at their feet. But Reaper's task was not-yet complete, as all inmates at Bomana needed to be brought into the fold. And so, he set about getting himself into the ranks of the officially imprisoned criminal elements. To accomplish this, he got the attention of one of his new followers, telling him not to worry as he drew a small blade from within a scar on his leg, only to drive the point into the belly of his chosen pawn. Reaper had smuggled the knife into the prison by concealing it within the false scar which he'd made from wax. This contraband weapon and the accompanying violence forced the warden to immediately transfer Reaper to the general population, fearing the danger that he now posed to those on remand. Unbeknownst to the guards, this wounded victim was a willing participant who was informed by Reaper that his sacrifice was essential to the grand strategy. The injured inmate was soon taken out of the prison and carted off to the nearest hospital. Meanwhile, Reaper was taken back to a small room, his knife confiscated, and his body accosted with beatings from the guards. After searching him again, Reaper was reclothed and sent back outside and into the prison yard, where he soon enacted the second part of the strategy.

Once the regular inmates had been converted to the cause, Reaper instructed them to start a prison riot in order to lure the guards into the compound. In the ensuing chaos, all 28 armed guards were soon overpowered by the sheer number of assailants. The guards were then all

butchered with machetes, formerly used by the trustworthy prisoners to cut coconuts for food, now used against the very figures who'd allowed them to be held by those that they used to trust. Their severed heads then adorned wooden stakes surrounding the chain link fence. After linking up with the remand prisoners, the army commandeered a prisoner transport truck that was parked outside of the front gate. Taking it into the city, Reaper made contact with Dracula at his temporary headquarters, who instructed him on the next part of his takeover. The official residence of the president was located not far from the city center. Being that it was in the wake of a massive breakout, their window of opportunity was closing fast. Dracula then told Reaper to go to the gates of the president's residence, where they would work together to take out the few guards on duty, as word of the escape was still fresh, and it had not yet reached the president's security detail, so surprise was still an option. Therefore, they would need to be stealthy, so as not to alert the man or his family of their impending doom. And so, the new army, now officially named "The Capital Army" by Dracula, drove their stolen truck towards the gated hillock of the presidential palace.

Dracula was more than satisfied with the new unit, recognizing them as powerful men, willing to commit acts of violence, who were now also supporting his idea of performing a coup d'etat in their country, courtesy of Reaper's persuasion. And now, with The Capital Army at his back, The Demon led them unnoticed through the darkened city streets of Port Moresby, all the way to the barricaded residence of the nation's president.

-

Into his window slipped Dracula, unlocking the front door from the inside. This done, a small division of The Capital Army crept quietly into the house, searching the various rooms for their quarry.

-

Meanwhile, Reaper and the rest of the army silently and violently dispatched the government soldiers that were guarding the perimeter. Their throats swiftly cut, so as to prevent their screams. Blood saturated the dirt and asphalt that surrounded the gated house, within which the others had just found their prize.

-

Dracula held a blade to the president's throat while threatening the lives of his family who were being held at knifepoint by the team that accompanied him. If the president refused to sign the entire country over to Dracula, then his wife and children would be killed right before his eyes. While the president claimed that this was not legally possible, Dracula cared not, commanding one of the soldiers to slit the wife's throat. He then obligingly sent a substantial volume of arterial spray in the president's direction, painting the wooden floor a brilliant red. The brutal death of his

wife finally being enough to make the president capitulate, he signed the document of transfer of official control of the government of Papua New Guinea to one Tobias Dracula Mercer. This document was typed up in that very room by The Demon himself as his goons still held the children under their knives. The former leader was then simply killed by the newly appointed President, cutting his throat immediately after signing the document. However, the illegality of his actions was not lost on The Demon, who then initiated part 3 of his strategy, the elimination of the Papuan parliament, as well as all of the remaining government officials, scattered about the capital. Fortunately for Dracula though, he'd thought this through as well. He then sat back down at the former leader's computer and began to type furiously, once again.

The next morning, paper letters were sent from the president's address, circulating their ways to the postal codes of every individual member of parliament. They explained that an emergency meeting of all government officials and parliament members was to convene immediately at the national parliament building in order to discuss potential solutions to a massive string of power outages throughout the capital city. As these letters made their rounds, Reaper was busy shutting down the city's electricity grid, so as to create a legitimate reason for the physical letters.

-

Once the officials received their envelopes, they left for the parliament building at once, believing the situation to be genuine. Dracula then initiated the final piece of this megalomaniacal jigsaw.

-

The building was soon packed to the gills with confused and concerned people, all discussing the situation amongst themselves. Suddenly, the sprinkler system was activated throughout the building, drenching them all, but not in water. A bright torch was then tossed into the room, igniting the liquid coating the officials. Fleeing like rats, they attempted to barge their way out through the main doors, only to find them barred from the other side. Those who ran for other exits were also unable to open them, The New Capital Army having been the ones to block all of the possible paths to escape, leaving those trapped within the flame-clad walls to die in panic. As the building burned in the night, Dracula emerged from the brightness behind him to address the army. Reaper stood by his side, while the countless screams calling out from deep in fire's embrace. Dracula then declared to his army that he was now and forever the King of Papua New Guinea, a leader who would not accede to the demands of a conniving body of ignorant politicians, but a singular visionary who vowed to give the relatively obscure island nation a place in the sun. The crowd cheered as the screams went silent and the parliament building collapsed into a black, charred husk stuffed with the desiccated carcasses of the representatives of a once democratic nation.

--Part V (The Kingdom)

The country was renamed “New Guinea” in the wake of Dracula’s takeover. The Capital Army was also renamed “The King’s Children”, with Reaper at the head as chief enforcer. Dracula also brazenly claimed that the Indonesian states of Papua and West Papua were to be part of his nation, New Guinea, and vowed to bring the entire island under one banner.

-

The politicians of Indonesia were less than pleased to hear the declarations made by New Guinea’s new king. In response, they sent a battalion of their special forces to oust the fledgling kingdom. None of them made it back alive, as they had all been captured by The King’s Children and summarily executed by lingchi, their dismembered bodies hung out to dry for weeks in the tropical Papuan sun. Dracula then appeared on camera and threatened Indonesia with complete annexation if they ever attempted something like this again. Needless to say, Indonesia was not amused, and responded with a full-scale incursion across the border. King Dracula responded with a border incursion of his own. But then, he abruptly ceased all border activities, immediately renouncing his imperialist statements. Instead, he offered to reconcile with Indonesia if they were only to meet with him in person. The Indonesians were understandably suspicious, and decided to send a decoy ambassador to negotiate with King Dracula. The look-alike was returned to Indonesia, save for everything below his neck. In his mouth was a roll of paper reading, *I do not appreciate being taken for an idiot. Send a real ambassador to speak with me, or I will annihilate your population of liars and charlatans.* The Indonesians were, once again, unamused. But they were not privy to the activities of Chief Enforcer Reaper, who was currently on his way to the United States on a mission to procure a weapon more deadly than an atomic bomb.

Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia was one of only 2 places in the world that housed what New Guinea needed. Reaper’s battalion entered the complex, quickly locating the woman who could give it to them. Her name was Clarice Benett, one of Emory’s foremost authorities on the virus named smallpox, or *variola.* And it was this woman whom Reaper required to gain access to it, as the university carried but a single sample of the deadly virus, one of only two in the entire world. Once she’d been captured with a knife to her throat, Clarice was told to lead them to where it was kept, a command to which she begrudgingly acceded. After she led them to the highly-guarded vault in which the virus was stored, Reaper commanded her to open the door. But this time, she refused, leading Reaper to cut off her right hand, using it to bypass the fingerprint lock. Then, he swiped her staff card through the second security layer, finally popping open the vault, at which point, Reaper shot Benett in the head and tossed her severed hand aside. The vial was smaller than what Reaper had imagined when he pulled it from its cold storage case. He then packed it into a specially-designed briefcase, and left the chamber with the rest of his battalion.

-

The group was then miraculously able to escape the university campus in the helicopter that had brought it there. However, one member left behind to be captured by the CIA not long after the rest of them had disappeared into the daylit sky. But Reaper had intended this, as his king wanted the world to know the power that he now possessed.

After refueling on a Chinese aircraft carrier, the helicopter landed in Port Moresby. Reaper emerged from the side doors and immediately handed the virus off to Dracula, who had met the helicopter as it arrived. The King of New Guinea had been striking a complex agreement with The Chinese Communist Party, giving him access to not only the high-tech briefcase which held the *variola,* but also allowed him to land the helicopter safely upon their aircraft carriers. In addition, a Chinese-appointed scientist, named Wei Yung, was tasked with assisting the Kingdom of New Guinea with its project, as the deal struck with Dracula was to allow Chinese influence in New Guinea in exchange for its assistance to Dracula's endeavors, whatever they happened to be. China had, after all, wanted to expand its power in the south-pacific region, and was increasingly desperate to do so after America's own recent deal with Indonesia to assist that country in its own territorial squabble with Dracula in the wake of his takeover of their neighbor 2 months before. Of course, all of this political chess was instigated by The Demon, who goaded Indonesia into a border crisis, then took the initiative to broker an alliance with the Chinese. After Reaper's raid on Emory University, America's predictably fiery response, and its subsequent pact with Indonesia, whose own rulers also detested Dracula, The King was given the perfect excuse to counterbalance this alliance with his own, leading to assisting China with its own ever-increasing global chess match with The US. With a powerful ally, and a convincing sales-pitch, Dracula was now on the cusp of becoming a main cast member on the world stage. Though, he was never truly on China's side, or anyone else's for that matter. And now, he had the ultimate weapon in his hands. A weapon that could kill the human population of Earth far more effectively than any nuclear warhead. However, Dracula's ideology did not call for immediate destruction. No. Humanity would first need to be broken, to once and for all, weeding out the weak and forging the strong, those who could withstand the torture for the longest ammount of time. Then, after the culling of the weak, humanity would be nothing but strength, the uncontested rulers of their own species.

--Part VI (The Empire)

With the smallpox virus having long been defeated, humanity no longer needed to create vaccines for *variola,* as the plague had been driven to near extinction via the mass inoculation of mankind. However, this decision to forgo the needles left the ape species completely vulnerable

to the venomous touch of *variola,* should it ever be resurrected. Therefore, if one were to employ its biological power, they would be able to bend society to their will by threatening to unleash it. Dracula was fully aware of this as he began to build his new empire, starting with his first targets, the ones who had rebuffed his requests, one too many times.

-

In his time as a guerilla fighter, Dracula had grown rather adept at leveraging lives. And now, he would put this technique to use on a much larger scale. His first act with his new weapon was to request Indonesia to seed its territories of Paupa and West Papua to New Guinea, refusal to do so would be met with a biological attack. This time, Indonesia broke, and officially turned both states over to Dracula, who declared the newly unified island nation “The Coral Empire'' in reference to The Coral Sea, around which a number of other island nations were coiled. And these smaller targets were the next ones to be diplomatically conquered. To begin his next series of annexations, King Dracula delivered the terms to The Solomon Islands, a vital chain of fortifiable land spilling out from New Guinea’s eastern coast.

-

Reaper was sent to negotiate their surrender of territory, and was tasked with eliminating their president if they resisted annexation. Upon his arrival at The Solomon Islands’ capital city of Honiara, he contacted the president and informed him of his country’s precarious position. Like Indonesia, the leader had little choice but to capitulate, signing a formal treaty of annexation to The Coral Empire.

Following this victory, King Dracula crowned himself Emperor, and revised the national flag. The new design was a simple sideways red “X” spanning a black field. It was declared the official flag of The Coral Empire, replacing the old flag of Papua New Guinea, which had still been in use until then. Not to be satisfied, Emperor Dracula then began to size up his next targets. This time, he didn’t even bother sending Reaper. Rather, he simply sent a letter to the leaders of the independent countries of Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Timor-Leste, and Fiji, giving them an ultimatum, *Fail to surrender your nation to The Coral Empire, and his majesty Emperor Tobias Dracula Mercer I will annihilate your people with his Weapon of Mass Destruction. Then, his majesty will take what is his. Sincerest Regards: The Coral Empire.* To demonstrate his willingness to follow through on his threat, Dracula then unleashed a small sample of the smallpox virus into an isolated community of Korowai in New Guinea, making sure that they were kept isolated. The Korowai were completely wiped out within days, and seeing this willingness to perpetrate indiscriminate mass-murder, the leaders of Vanuatu, Fiji, and New Caledonia all willingly surrendered their nations’ sovereignties, with New Caledonia severing all diplomatic connections with France in order to do so, with their former overlords unwilling to become involved in Dracula’s toxic spider web of political chess. The only holdout country was Timor-Leste, whose leaders had resisted occupation by Indonesia for decades, and were not

about to surrender to a self-declared emperor. So Dracula turned up the screws. Using mass media to contact them, he threatened to unleash the virus upon the citizens, unless those citizens overthrew their current leaders and signed control of the country over to him. Timor-Leste was then plunged into complete chaos as a massive rebellion against the leadership was launched by the citizens in an effort to save themselves from the wrath of Dracula. As this upheaval occurred, reports from the Sepik region of New Guinea indicated a nebulous wave of violence, stealing Dracula's attention. As Timor-Leste burned itself down, The Emperor gradually grew aloof to the prospect of its annexation, and became more concerned about the apparent unrest in the Sepik. And so, Dracula left for the river, giving Reaper temporary control of Port Moresby until his return. But The Chief Enforcer could never have imagined that this seemingly small matter of crushing public dissent could transform Dracula, and his philosophy of renewal-through-destruction, into a far more dangerous idea. An idea that would strip society to the bone, and kill billions of people.

--Part VII (The Riverine Dragon)

The fresh scars Dracula bore were beginning to keel, giving them the appearance of crocodilian osteoderms. He had seen something weeks before this that had made him question everything, something that was antithetical to the ideology he'd created. And this transition was enough to convince him to mark it with a Sepik ritual of transcendence, from a pale demon, to scaled dragon. He'd witnessed true strength displayed, and subsequently punished, by those who were victims of it. A dragon of the river, a true exhibition of evolutionary power, produced through torture and destruction, bringing about a renewal, a revitalization, not unlike his own experience with Augusta. And when it plucked a human from the shoreline, Dracula was awestruck by its beauty and raw power. But then, the truth was revealed to him a week after his arrival in the river valley to crush what he had thought was violence directed at his new empire, only to realize his mistake, and the truth about the species he ruled.

They greeted their Emperor with open arms, grateful for his annexation of the Papuan territories of Indonesia. But this was not what drew him here, for it was the reports of violence upon which his ire was fixated. But this savagery was not political in origin. Rather, it had been born from a primal prejudice and malice at its most pure. The people of Ambunti, the settlement to which Dracula had come, explained to him that one of the townsfolk had been savaged by a large saltwater crocodile, and that they had retaliated by butchering a score of the large reptiles, down to the last hatchlings squeaking for their mother. This puzzled Dracula, who then told them to cease their killing of crocodiles, as the animals were perfect exhibitions of natural power. But the Abmuntians refused their emperor's orders, resolved to kill anything that dared attack them, no matter how powerful it was. This statement was a shock to Dracula, who was appalled at this disregard of a much more capable animal being killed for this very attribute by a species that

was too ignorant and vain to recognize the creature for what truly represented, an animal that was better than them at what it did without even trying to be. *What gives them the right?* Dracula thought to himself, *why should these people get to decide what should and should not be allowed to take them? The crocodiles are not petty enough to think themselves superior. They simply exist without this notion, and with pure natural power at their disposal. Why do these people seek violence in response to greater abilities?* Then, it hit him. *They are afraid of power, so they destroy that which is more powerful, because they are not. Humanity refuses to improve itself, so it destroys any other animals that have. Humans are the antithesis of power. They are the manifestation of pettiness and arrogance. They are the enemies of natural power. And as long as they exist, the world will never be able to improve itself. They must die.* Dracula then decided to alter his ideology, and his ultimate goal. He then endured the kind of improvement that he was convinced was necessary to become more powerful, torture and subsequent renewal. So he subjected himself to the Sepik crocodile scarification ritual, performed by the people there to transform boys into men through bloodletting. These cuts were made across the entire torso in such a way that the scars would keel upon healing, creasing upward, like the folding of a sheet of paper, creating an everlasting pattern of scars that appeared to be the scales of the riverine dragons. Dragons that they also thought to kill, due to their fear of the reptiles' power. Power that Dracula now possessed, once his own ritual was completed. Upon the healing and keeling of his new mosaic of scale-like scars, Dracula ceased to be The Demon, becoming The Riverine Dragon. That night, he single-handedly burned Ambunti to the ground, then disappeared into the inky blackness, with the glinting eyes of crocodiles glowing like stars in the darkened reeds of the Sepik River, creating a constellation of life. Eyes that seemed to tell The Riverine Dragon, *thank you.*

---The Mushroom Chronicles---

The bright colors on the television screen bobbed about as Cleigh and Armatage watched on in a deep, unrelenting malaise. High out of their skulls on their favorite toxic fungus, the friends shivered, sweated, and laughed uncomfortably at the bright, flowing artwork and the disconnected visuals and music of their chosen picture, Disney's "Fantasia". However, they had acquired their fairly substantial stash of magic mushrooms from the lowest tier apparatus of the city-wide crime syndicate known as "The Mushroom Kingdom'', a cartel that had been founded by one of the most violent men in the history of the drug trade. Suddenly, the lock on the front door was struck from its foundation, and into the room, burst a pair of armed men who immediately demanded to know where the mushrooms they'd stolen from "Papa Smurf'' were being stored. Cleigh responded that he did not know. Only for one of the intruders to fire a bullet into Armatage's forehead, killing him instantly and causing Cleigh to bolt for the back door as the second intruder pursued him. Nonetheless, Cleigh managed to escape the house and hide in some bushes that hugged the picket fence. His pursuer stepped out onto the back porch and scanned the yard for him. But miraculously, the first intruder called to his partner, saying that he had found the mushrooms and decided that they had "sent enough of a message". The second intruder then simply shrugged, fired off a round of ammunition into the night, as if to mark his territory, then turned and left the house with his accomplice. Cleigh quivered and cried in the dense, dark bushes of his murdered friend's yard, waiting in complete silence for the next set of goons to find and kill him.

-

The victim of this home invasion was far from the first, as The Mushroom Kingdom's jurisdiction extended far into suburbs of the city. It was a despotic monarchy, ruled by a psychotic king to whom anything was fair as long as he turned a profit. But the destruction of empathy is seldom a vacuum-born act. As was the case with Papa Smurf whose real identity was Dre Szander. His mother was troubled to the point where she begged for money, heroine, and soon, death. A prayer that she'd ended up answering herself when her life was claimed by a tainted syringe. Dre's father, a nameless old cotter, was grief-stricken. He began to abuse him, tenderizing his flesh as though he was pounding out a steak with a mallet. Eventually though, this mallet was swiped by his son, who proceeded to beat his own father to death with it, opening his skull with a claw hammer when it became apparent that the mallet only prolonged a life that Dre wished to end. With blood slicking the floor and drenching his maniacal hands, Dre knew that his time was up when the sounds of sirens emitted from outside.

---

6 years of juvenile imprisonment followed his conviction, being released upon his turn to age 18. But reformed and healed, he was not. And he was driven now, more than ever, to become a king, a ruler of the house like his father. The difference was that Dre's house would become the

entire city. And little by little, he began to cultivate men, money, and mushrooms. Sowing seeds of power that fast grew into trees upon which his new empire would rest.

A full decade of this consolidation had led Dre to truly become a king. The King of the Mushroom Kingdom, whose name was Papa Smurf, a moniker given to him by the citizens over whom he ruled.

One night, one member of his legion of dealers came to his office with a complaint about theft of some of his product. In response, Papa Smurf sent 2 of his enforcers to deal with the accused perpetrators.

-

The thieves were found watching “Disney’s Fantasia”, high out of their skulls. One of them was killed, while the other fled, hiding in the bushes, never to be truly safe from the man who controlled the city, and the lives of its residents. People who were children in their new father’s house.

---The Economy of Human Courtship---

Blood adorned the closed fists, as the match reached its third hour. The knuckles met the teeth of his jaw again and again, and would continue to do so until the repeatedly assaulted had renounced his claim to that most beckoning of thrones, upon which the winner would place himself once his competitor’s life had ended. After he was reduced to a bloody and bruised heap cast upon the pavement, the winner of the joust claimed his reward. A reward named affection. And all others who lost their engagements died, as their minds were small, and thought that they had no more reason to live, as the notion of love was all that had occupied that most miniscule of spaces between the ears.

---My Captors---

My flesh burned at the touch of a heated iron, as though it were a slice of pork on a saucepan. My arms were bent backward and tied to the wall behind me, the thick ropes eating into my wrists, blood dripping onto the stone floor. The contempt written upon the faces of my captors was a burn sharper than that of the iron that braised my skin. As they flinched not in the presence of my suffering. They beat my head, lashed my back where they didn't burn it, and at every strike, they spoke to me these words, *You are worthless, you are unworthy, and you should give up*. And at every end of these words, they cut my flesh and beat my body. And the places that they didn't, they burned with oil and hot iron. *You are one of us, whether you like it, or not. You are no different. You are to be like us, or dead*, they said. They then continued to assault my being, carve my wrists, and strike my head with merciless metal, attempting to warp me into someone that I refused to be.

---Mythos-Blackheart---

They say that creating life is playing god. But if that's true, then why does every living thing do just that?

And at what point is a god responsible for the deeds of its creation?

From the star thronged sky, a dead star fell to the Earth. But even in death, it remained the strongest force in the universe, its immense energy locked into a small black stone that drew in the light of the sun. However, in its current state, the stone could be safely touched, only able to use its concealed power when granted the correct ingredients.

-

Not far away, a young scientist, named Kaya Hale, recovered the stone from the grass and took it back to her laboratory at MIT, where an electromagnetic analysis came back with incredible results, brimming with more potential than the woman had ever anticipated. For nearly a decade, Kaya had been working on a groundbreaking project, one which would emblazon her name upon the pages of scientific history. For entire career, she had been obsessed with creating life, attempting to uncover the reason for such a thing to be possible for biology, yet seemingly impossible for an artifice to achieve. But now, with a new and untapped power source, Kaya was finally confident enough to create a mechanical being, who could, for all intents and purposes, be branded as human.

---

8 months later, the dull eyes of the automaton glowed to life. Kaya had named her creation "Blackheart", after her favorite song by DIAMANTE. And slowly, its limbs began to move. But when its glowing black eyes met the piercing blue ones of Kaya, it seemed to become transfixed. Then, it began to speak, and Kaya was awestruck at her achievement, wanting to explore it further. She engaged Blackheart in conversation after the automaton asked her for her name, to which she responded with her first. But then, Blackheart told her something that made her question her actions for the first time in her scientific endeavor. It told her that she was beautiful. And this compliment, from a robot that she had created, perturbed her, and she grew increasingly uncomfortable as its unflinching eyes followed her every move.

-

Over the next several weeks, Kaya attempted to educate her creation about humanity, society, and its own place within it all. She then pointed to the small silver circles on the various parts of its body, revealing that they functioned like the electrocytes that were present in electric eels, the

cells used by the knifefish to stun their prey and incapacitate their predators. The silvery metallic circles pockmarking Blackheart though, were designed to channel the immense energy residing in the black stone that powered him. In her painstaking months of research, Kaya had realized that this stone was, in fact, a calcified black hole. Inert as a solid, the object still retained all of its previous energy from when it was a fully collapsed all-consuming star. However, the process by which it had achieved this solid state was a complete mystery, with Kaya never able to figure out when or why this occurred. But this was seldom on her mind when constructing her robot, as she was far more preoccupied with how to tap into the inconceivable amount of power locked in this comparatively small rock. Remarkably, she accomplished this feat by concocting a unique type of metal, created from small slivers of the rock itself, combining them with a rare variant of steel and tungsten alloy to construct a spider web of channels that attached to the stone, which was implanted into the robot's chest. These channels led to the various silvery circular outflows that dotted Blackheart's metal skin. This latter substance was made from tungsten carbide and weaved carbon fiber, creating a nigh-impenetrable surface. In her obsessive quest, Kaya Hale had created the deadliest machine in human history, a machine that had apparently gained a level of attraction to its creator, who was now teaching it how to use its powerful gifts. Chief amongst these, was Blackheart's disturbing ability to control the relentless pull of gravity. In particular, the gravity within its radius, including its own. And soon, it was able to lift chairs, tables, and even cars, all without coming within 10 feet of them. All the while, during its training, Blackheart complimented Kaya, telling her how attractive it thought she was, further making her question her decision to bring it to life, making her realize that she had been so focused on what she could do with the stone, that she had never stopped to consider what should've been done with it. The tunnel-vision of scientific progress, blinding her to any alternatives. At this point however, Kaya had made peace with these other pathways, and carried on with training Blackheart on how to constructively utilize its abilities, thinking to herself that she could somehow salvage her reservations and make this being into a productive member of society, all the while confining Blackheart to her private lab at MIT, never permitting it outside those walls. When she left the building, she chained Blackheart's ankles to the floor until it learned to stay put. Eventually though, Kaya's security became increasingly atrophied, as her exhaustion had got the better of her. And after only 3 nights of the routine, she neglected to shackle the robot down. And every morning, she would arrive at the lab, only to find Blackheart practicing its abilities without her. Subsequently, she decided that it would be best to let Blackheart freely exercise its abilities as long as it obeyed her rules. Perhaps to please her, it agreed, as long as no more chains were placed on it. Satisfied, Kaya returned to educating her artificial pupil. During these lessons however, Blackheart would question the recurring notions of society and contribution, arguing that its abilities were far too powerful for the types of tasks that Kaya had directed it to perform. It seemed to want more, especially when it looked at Kaya. It wanted more than she was offering, a void that grew ever darker, to its increasing agitation.

One night, some 3 weeks later, Kaya awoke to find Blackheart standing in her room, staring at her. Blackheart silenced her subsequent scream by clapping its metal hand over her mouth, shushing her with a robotic ring from its mouthpiece. It declared itself to be "a man", then stated

that a man should be with a woman, just like she had said in one of her lessons. Kaya was terrified, but when her mouth was released, she did not respond to Blackheart, or scream for help. The new man responded to her silence by stating that he would “try harder tomorrow”, then dove out the window. Kaya scrambled out of bed and rushed to see what would happen, only to witness her creation levitating himself in the air and hovering back to the lab. She then realized that Blackheart had figured out how to manipulate his own gravity, and telekinetically lift himself off of the ground, without her teaching him how to do it. The robot was learning on its own. This revelation greatly terrified Kaya, who now understood that if Blackheart could teach himself to fly, then he could also teach himself to destroy. She then dressed herself and ran outside, following Blackheart to MIT. When she arrived, he was already there, holding up an oil tanker that he’d plucked from the road. Kaya screamed at him to put the truck down, to which he responded by casually dropping it, damaging the hull, and letting the flammable substance stream from a large hole made by the impact with the ground. Blackheart then levitated Kaya by controlling the gravity around her, raising her 10 feet in the air. He then opened his other hand, revealing a small lighter, and promptly flicked it to life. Kaya screamed, squirmed, and panicked, writhing like a serpent in a predator’s grasp. Kaya was about to angrily plead with her creation to let her go, but she choked on those words as she realized what that would mean. Blackheart then declared his feelings for Kaya once more and gave her a choice of either being with him or being let go, forever. He then dropped the lighter into the oil, setting it alight. Within minutes, the entire floor was engulfed in an inferno, and Kaya was flailing mere feet from the fire, licking her toes and making her panic even more than she already was. Blackheart, again, tried to make her choose, only to be met with the same responses as before. Realizing that Kaya had no intention of being with him, and looking down in disappointment, Blackheart released his gravitational grip on the woman he’d wanted, sending her screaming into the fire below, where his red orbits witnessed her long dark hair, piercing blue eyes, and flawlessly pale skin all disappear as she rapidly burned alive, her screams cut to pieces by the roar of fire. Blackheart then fled the scene, just as the tanker exploded, completely destroying the lab in which he was raised.

Blackheart escaped a few miles to the west, landing in Ohio near the border with Pennsylvania. He never understood why Kaya had not made the choice to be with him rather than die. *It was so illogical,* he thought. Failing to comprehend what had happened at MIT. The lessons about society and empathy given to him by Kaya also hit a brick wall in his mind. It was all so arbitrary to him. *Why do I need to become what they want me to be, when I could outmatch them for both strength and intellect?* Blackheart then though, *They’re afraid of me. As well they should be. Kaya was afraid, because I had more power than she did. Why is that a bad thing? If power decides winners, then why shouldn’t I win?* He soon began to connect the dots he’d created, all the while, he became more and more convinced in his own superiority over humanity and the artifices that they had constructed around themselves to project more power than they truly had, like a small dog whose barks echo loudly enough to scare off a larger one. Blackheart concluded that humans were the smaller dogs, barking their rhetoric at him, the larger dog, to

keep him and his power at bay. No longer would he be cowed and held back by humanity's tepid leash of conformity. The small dog would learn its place or die, just like Kaya.

The entire building had been imploded, with all of its occupants mercilessly crushed to death in the cruel constriction of gravity. It was the main science building of MIT, not far from Kaya's flame-consumed lab where Blackheart had killed his first person. However, he was far from finished. To demonstrate his superiority to the human species, he decided to kill a vast number of them at once. And what better place to do so, than the place that had given him life. Over 350 people were killed in this second act of violence, perpetrated by Blackheart. But he was only just getting started.

-

What followed was a full week of nonstop slaughter, devastation, and irreparable damage to both private and public property. No place was safe from his wrath, as Blackheart targeted any place that he saw as "pathetic" or "catering to the weak". And so, he destroyed hospitals, retirement homes, daycares, kindergartens, fairs, parties, and anywhere else he saw fit to receive his telekinetic grasp. Anywhere the inhabitants could not fight back. But then, almost as soon as Blackheart had begun his rampage, the US military had located him and promptly targeted him for elimination. As most of Boston's citizens had either fled the city or been killed, the secretary of defence had next to no reservations about using nuclear force. And so, an atomic warhead was launched from a silo Washington DC, meeting Blackheart a little over a minute later. The robot actually spotted the missile, but intoxicated by his own power, he merely stopped the projectile with his gravitational abilities, only for it to immediately detonate mere feet from his metallic face. The military had manually triggered the weapon, setting it off before Blackheart could escape. He now lay broken, beyond repair in the ruins of Boston. Still functioning, but unable to move or speak. However, he was still able to access the energy contained within his stone heart. With government troops approaching his position, Blackheart poured every ounce of his remaining power inward, crushing his own heart with the unrelenting force at his disposal. So great was the volume of this last act, that Blackheart's core imploded with the force of trillions of atomic bombs, enough to recreate the stellar black hole that was truly his heart, if only for a moment, as the energy firing inward was finite and unsustainable, meaning that a true black hole could not remain active for long. But it was more than enough time for the colonial city to vanish into its pitch throat, inhaling with it all of the soldiers approaching his position. The cosmic force then atomized itself, unable to stay cohesive in its current form. And so, it disappeared, taking Blackheart's metal remains into the void. This final act had left the legacy of Kaya Hale's science project as nothing more than a massive hollow crater that swallowed the very place that she used to call home. The place where she and her creation became ashes, drifting in the wind.

---The Fiend---

Hours of sleep never drove him off. As I lay upon the floor, that vision remained unbroken by the fog of the illusion that my mind had cast. His eyes were a pale yellow, and his darkened hands were wrapped around my throat. And as he squeezed with an ever-tightening constriction, he whispered to me, *You are unworthy*. And I believed these words that emanated from the maw of the fiend who was drawing the very life from my lungs.

---The Omnicide Saga---

--The First Omnicide of the Apes--

1: Humans are the racists of the animal kingdom.
2: You will get nothing by bitching at a building.
3: There is more to life than people.
4: I have always been jealous of orphans, for they get to make their own decisions.
5: I will not give all people amnesty, just because one person is doing the right thing.
6: If you can't control them, kill them.
7: Dead people are the only ones that can be trusted.
8: Punish the guilty, not yourself.
9: Not everything needs to be used for its intended purpose.
10: When it comes to dealing with people, it's not about having the right, it's about having the ability.
11: You don't need justification if you already know that you're doing the right thing.
12: Do not leave the world without exacting a toll.

These new edicts were plastered upon every wall of Port Moresby, the tenets of which raised more than a few eyebrows, especially from Reaper, who was absolutely baffled at the alterations undergone by his Emperor. When Dracula returned, freshly scarred, to the capital from the Sepik, his second in command inquired about all of this, to a very disappointing response. The mission had, indeed, been reconfigured by The Riverine Dragon, as had his driving philosophy, much to Reaper's confusion. Then, Dracula told him of what he had seen and done in Ambunti, leaving Reaper stunned and further questioning the Emperor about his newly revised ideology. To which, Dracula explained that humans were actively preventing nature from bettering itself through destruction and power, and that only by eliminating them could that process continue unimpeded. In accordance with this notion of extinction, Dracula sent 198 secret agents to every airport in the world, each of them carrying a modified sample of the smallpox lifted from Emory, all to be released upon his command. Dracula had made that call from Ambunti, prior to its destruction. The mission was to be accomplished with a vast team of agents and a fleet of private jets, courtesy of their alliance with China, who had no inkling of their true intentions. The Papuans making it appear as though they were simply sending these agents, who were disguised as diplomats whose briefcases concealed the virus, to further discuss annexations of their territories to The Coral Empire, never knowing that they had just given this angel of death the wings to travel abroad and unleash its scythe upon their species. Hearing of this turn of events, Reaper was furious, as the original idea, to which he'd become attached, was to cull humanity, leaving alive only those who emerged stronger than the rest. Dracula's new omnicidal approach was far from what Reaper had in mind for a better world. But all of those pieces were currently landing into place, and Reaper had a choice to make.

As the various planes approached their destinations, Dracula sat comfortably in his throne, patiently waiting for the word of the agents to inform him of their readiness for his command. But as The Riverine Dragon sat idle, Reaper approached him. Without hesitation, he climbed up the steps to his master’s throne. And when Dracula looked up to question him, Reaper’s fist made its way into his pale face. Blood ran from his nose as his body was dragged from the chair and thrown to the floor. But in his rage-fueled haze, Reaper had not yet realized that he had woken a dragon that grimaced at the sight of betrayal, saying nothing as he drew a large knife from his pocket and lunged for his former ally.

-

Across the world, the airplanes were starting to land at their various targets, all the while, The Emperor fought with Reaper within the freshly constructed throne room of Port Moresby, a fight that soon ended with Reaper’s wrist slit, his face bludgeoned, and a deep gash in his side, drenching Dracula’s knife and spattering his clothes in his former friend's blood. With the traitor crippled, he called for his guards and accused Reaper of “non-cooperation”, rather than treason. The guards then gathered the unconscious prisoner and took him to an off-site facility for “reconditioning”, a painful procedure undergone by all 198 agents that were thereafter tasked with releasing the smallpox. Dracula followed his guards on their way to the facility, still waiting for his queue from the reconditioned agents, currently landing their planes, with only 78 countries left to be infiltrated. At the reconditioning facility, Reaper was strapped into a chair and electrodes were attached to specific points on his head. At the flip of a switch, Dracula sent waves of electromagnetic shocks into his former ally’s brain, over and over again, until his mind had shattered into a thousand pieces.

-

The last plane landed in Ethiopia an hour later. And the call from that aircraft came immediately afterward, informing Dracula that they were all ready to release the virus. Reaper sat limp in the arms of the reconditioning chair, the leather straps carving into his already wounded wrists. Then, the call came from Ethiopia, giving Dracula the clearance to bring about his vision. The Emperor then immediately issued the order to unleash the weapon.

The smallpox ripped through the planet upon Dracula’s command to turn it loose, alarming all of the world’s governments beyond measure. The revelation that it was The Coral Empire that had done this made China withdraw its support. And Australia then began to mobilize its military, and a strategy to depose Emperor Dracula was drawn up by The Coral Empire’s immense southern neighbor, but not before the *variola* tore society down.

Over the next 4 months, thousands of people died every single day across the world. Not to be deterred, what remained of Australia launched their invasion of New Guinea from across The Torres Strait. China had failed to mobilize its army and join the attack, as its previously formidable nation had been almost completely wiped out by the smallpox. Nonetheless, Australia, even with its crippled population, had managed to muster a considerable force of some 10,000 troops from what remained of its people.

-

Meanwhile, in a Port Moresby shattered by Dracula's virus, The Emperor had barricaded himself within the reconditioning facility, along with his few guards and Reaper, the latter of whom had been repeatedly forced into and out of consciousness while Dracula warped his thoughts at every turn, his venomous words dripping into Reaper's ears and seeping into his mind, convincing him to embrace the new philosophy of Dracula, of nature's power and humanity's destruction. With each shock from the chair and each word from Dracula, Reaper shed yet more of his former personality, ever becoming thrust into another mind that was purely of Dracula's design.

-

The Australian armada reached the city in a day, and from the landings, the invasion commenced in earnest. When Dracula was informed of the enemy troops flooding the capital, he was unnamused. But he panicked not. Rather, he calmly unfastened Reaper from the chair in which the latter had been restrained for almost 4 months, creating a living, breathing product of Dracula's original philosophy, power created through destruction. The newly warped Reaper was then immediately handed Dracula's personal knife and was given the task of wiping out the remaining guards in the room. Without hesitation, Reaper complied, swiftly slaughtering them all in moments. Dracula then anointed him with the mission of carrying his legacy, sending him west to Bangladesh. Reaper then silently slipped out of the facility and successfully remained uncaptured as he disappeared into the vast jungles of New Guinea. As for Emperor Dracula, his time had come to an end. Having stocked the re-conditioning facility with cans of gasoline, in case the site needed to be destroyed, The Riverine Dragon then began pouring it around the room. Then, he drew a lighter from his shoe, struck its wick, and simply waited for his enemies to appear at the gates.

-

Shortly thereafter, the doors to the facility broke inward, and dozens of Australian troops swarmed the hallways. Upon hearing their entry, Dracula took a deep breath, and let the lighter fall.

Reaper saw the inferno from his hiding place in the thick forest overlooking Port Moresby. And with this visual confirmation, he knew that Emperor Tobias Dracula was dead, as were the enemy soldiers that thought they could capture a dragon alive. Reaper then slithered off into the jungle, escaping the island a week later, and vowed to honor The Riverine Dragon's final request.

---

4 years following the death of its emperor, The Coral Empire had become a nigh-depopulated ruin, a fate that was shared with the rest of the world. However, within that brief sliver of time, the apes were never completely wiped out. Still, the world would never be the same. And all because of one man and his immortal voice. A voice that now made its home in the mind of Reaper, the anointed successor to the legacy of The Riverine Dragon.

---Stone Island---

Rising from the sea, stands a great mountain of stone. Where it came from, no one knows. It is composed of layered pillars of solid rock that are stacked in a pattern not unlike the interwoven fibers in a cut of fabric, as if humans were the ones that had created it. But for what purpose, remains elusive for their present minds to grasp. As the apes of current ages underestimate, and fail to understand, the merits of ancient generations. Yet high above their boats does the calcified structure tower, as if to declare to the apes, huddled within their little hulls, that it will outlast them in time.

---The Forest---

Trees bring with them the shadows of their growth. And sometimes, these shadows harbor terrors, unseen by those who are prey.

-

Its back was arched and clad in matted black fur, iridescent with the shine of its victims' blood, fresh and immense in its volume. Beneath its feet towered a pile of human remains, the bones still bearing scarlet stains. Its drooling jaws dripped with reddened saliva, as if mocking those whose offal it had cast down its throat. And at the deaths of its prey did this creature smile.

---The Mountain---

The black canopy of feathers, the human carcasses picked clean, and the balded young ones begging in the immensity of interwoven debris that crowned the mountain. And when mother wasn't home, she hunted in the nearby village, abducting her bipedal prey only to present the squealing thing to her children who tore at the flailing limbs of their food that was so graciously given to them. Though, mother sought not the larger apes, for their bulk was too much weight to carry, and for her children, it was too much effort to rip asunder. So mother made food of the little ones instead, much to the delight of her own.

---The Omnicide Saga---

--The Chaos of the Scythe--

--Part I

No matter what is said by the spineless and hopeless, one man can change the world. All he needs is the right weapon, and the right targets.

In Dhaka, the sun shone brightly in the midday sky. The commuter train had yet to arrive, leaving the bazaar open for the next hour. But among the thick crowds of buyers and vendors was a wealthy man from Dubai. A man from whom a misty cloud of blood was expelled. And there he dropped like a fly. The crowd erupted in fear, descending into chaos. All because one man was killed by one who remained unseen. It was random and reasonless. It was terrifying. And terror was his greatest weapon. And to remain unseen in broad daylight was the perfect way to introduce to the world a man who could kill anyone he wanted. It was then that another victim of his was barrelling towards the bazaar at full speed. And into the congested, fleeing crowd it collided, pulverizing over 200 people, all of whom died in their own reddened sprays. He had killed the train driver and barred the door behind him as he left, an hour before he arrived at the bazaar. And all of this death was unleashed because 2 people had been killed to make it happen. And with this first act of resurgence, The Demon's Shadow was well on his way to making the Emperor's dream a reality.

It had been over 4 years since the smallpox had burned through humanity. And it had been nearly 2 years since a second vaccine was developed for this particular strain of *variola,* being freely distributed by the few governments left intact. However, 1 year after this seminole event in human history, multiple successive waves of new strains of smallpox saw these nations crumble into history.

-

In the end, after all of the infected humans had been culled by the virus, their species' global population had been reduced to a quarter of what it had been just 5 years ago. From 8,000,000,000 to a mere 320,000,000, worldwide. As such, there was now a power vacuum like no other. So pronounced was this void, that anyone who could rule by force carved out a fiefdom for themselves, dividing the world into a pseudo-feudal system for the first time in millenia.

-

Among these few survivors of Dracula's apocalyptic killing spree was his brainwashed protege, Reaper, who had successfully avoided the virus' lethal touch, and who was currently held up in a Bangladeshi apartment. However, just because the people called themselves Bangaldeshi, did not mean that nation truly existed. As was the case for the entire world. The true power now lay in the hands of countless lords, kings, and emperors, all of whom were self-made rulers. Such was the situation in Dracula's old seat, The Coral Empire, now controlled by a man who betrayed his Australian unit in the wake of the invasion half a decade before, and had brought the remnants of the empire to heel. Now, The Coral Empire was the uncontested power in southeast Asia, engulfing all of the islands south of China. Its borders now stretched from Fiji to Thailand, and even encompassed the entire Australian continent.

-

Other kingdoms also coalesced into relative unity, such as the current Lordship of the Ganges, a somewhat smaller realm whose leader controlled northern India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and southeast China.

-

Then, there were the countless tribal clans that constantly combated one another throughout the remainder of the middle kingdom, a no man's land that extended northwards into Siberia and even into eastern Europe. These clans were known colloquially as The Snow-mads, due to their frosty domains in northern Asia and their refusal to unify their territories.

-

In the Americas, things were very different, as the United States had been torn apart by a civil war. Following the 2-year pandemic of smallpox, and a collapsed economy, the nation descended into full anarchy. In the aftermath, 2 opposing governments were formed, and these were constantly involved in border skirmishes in the Rocky Mountains. The western nation was known as Laramidia and was ruled by a mad tyrant, who possessed a reputation for skinning his enemies alive. While on the eastern side, a nation called Appalachia was governed by a democratically elected monarch, who was then given absolute power upon being sworn into office.

-

In the southern continent, with the rapid recovery of The Amazon Rainforest, due to humanity's cull, few cohesive settlements formed, as the terrain made territorial unity nigh-impossible. However, in the far south, a nation called Patagonia was loosely confederated along tribal lines, held together via a strongman dictator.

-

Meanwhile, in The Sahara, the situation was much the same as it was in northeast Asia, only these warring tribes were known as Berbers, whether or not they truly belonged to that ethnicity. All south of the sands of the desert were referred to as Southerners on the continent.

-

Western Europe was also a political black hole, not unlike the Western Roman Empire, long ago.

-

However, the lands of eastern and central Europe were entirely different, as they were now a unified entity, dubbed The Enterprise of the Black Sea, whose people specialized in hunting beluga sturgeon, and whose appetites for deaths of non-humans knew no bounds, national or otherwise. This propensity to hunt the giant fish also landed them with the pejorative nickname “Belugas”, as a reference to this abhorrent practice.

-

All in all, the world beyond Dracula had become a very different place, all because of that one man and his penchant for omnicide. And now, his shadow sat in The Lordship of the Ganges, mulling over his next moves.

-

The world had also shifted ideologically. Since the apocalyptic crash of humanity and its civilization, the religions of the past were almost entirely rejected out of a collective loss of faith in their previous gods. Instead, they decided to cling to the one ideology that had seemed to hold any merit in their current circumstances. The philosophy that preached strength through torture, followed by destruction of the tormenter. Dracula’s original ideology had finally found a following in the dying days of the pandemic, and it was now practiced by the majority of people throughout the various tribes and kingdoms they occupied. It had been labelled Renewalism, as its core tenant was personal renewal through torture.

-

However, a small group of people, founded in The Coral Empire, decided to follow Dracula’s most recent edicts, the ones that nearly wiped out their entire species. This deviation was known as Draculism, for its founder. And this secretive group desired but one thing, to finish what The Riverine Dragon had started.

-

But the majority Renewalists vehemently opposed this notion, as their species was stripped of weakness and now the survivors must live for strength and power, as they had come to understand through these last 5 years of death and torment, so who could blame them for their unquenchable thirst for a bright side, a reason for their suffering. But the Draculists, with their mission still to be completed, opposed the idea of a good human species, believing in the latter edicts of Emperor Dracula, plastered upon the walls and buildings of his great capital city of Port Moresby. A city that they desired to see upended, as its current ruler, the second Coral Emperor, was a staunch believer in Renewalism, much to the Draculists' horror and revulsion. And so, their cabal hatched a stratagem that would replace the apostate emperor with one who could lead them, a true believer who was handed the torch of The Riverine Dragon, so many years before. One who wanted to complete the omnicide of the apes.

-

The Cabal of Dracula was headquartered in Port Moresby. But with Emperor Neil I tasking his Australian security force, renamed The New Capital Army, with hunting them down, The Cabal seldom stayed there. Choosing instead to hide within the cloudy city of Mount Hagen, nestled in the central highlands of New Guinea. And it was from this mountain stronghold that The Cabal ordered one of its most trusted members to locate and contact Reaper. Their sources had reported that he was indeed alive and currently staying in The Lordship of the Ganges, far to the northwest. This theory was given ever more weight when news of the train incident reached The Coral Empire. Suspecting Reaper's involvement, they chose an agent, codenamed Karambit, to be armed with a knife, a mask, and a GPS device left over from the pre-smallpox age. He was then given a directive to bring Dracula's protege into the fold and kill anyone who stood in his way. He soon left Mount Hagen via a cessna aircraft and headed eastward across the island, landing in the coastal city of Jaypura in the north, from where he finally took a boat to the southern end of The Philippines, disembarking on the remote island of Mindanao. Then, he boarded a second boat, bound for the Mekong Delta, at the edge of The Coral Empire.

The Lordship of the Ganges was controlled by a wealthy clan of former business tycoons from New Delhi. But after the smallpox decimated that city, the family of 8 made their way east and into Kolkata. Then, in a swift coup, the family took control of the city, naming it the new capital of the shattered Asian realm, as Kolkata remained cohesive despite its equally devastating cull. The head of the ruling family was Lord Amir Khan, changed from his original family label of Ilnuna. Together with his wife and sons, he kept a vice-like grip on the convergence of the two crucial rivers, The Ganges and The Brahmaputra. Although this confluence was his empire's beating heart, Amir's vast reach extended well beyond these watery arteries. The far south of this border touched Thailand and Cambodia, where the Draculist agent made his entrance into the sovereign domain. A long train ride later, he arrived at his destination, where a massive funeral was being held at the bazaar for the countless victims of the train attack. Even though the world had embraced Renewalism, humans still lamented their dead, worshipping them as

sacrifices to their own strength and power, as if thanking them for feeding it. Posing as a mourner, Karambit scoured the crowd for any sign of Reaper, but remained disappointed. And after 2 hours, he stealthily slipped from the crowd and surveyed the rest of the city to find him.

Reaper had left his latest victim twitching in a chair with bound hands and a deep slash across his throat. His victim was a member of the royal family who had taken a secret day trip from Kolkata to Dhaka, where he'd become ensnared by Reaper, who killed him in his hotel room soon after. He had wanted to overthrow The House of Khan by luring its members into the city and methodically eliminating them one at a time. But as he slipped out of the building, he made contact with Karambit, who had been clandestinely informed of the Khan in the hotel via a paid informant who had seen him being led into the building by a suspicious-looking man wearing all black. Knowing that Dracula's last assignment for Reaper was to travel to Bangladesh, Karambit surmised the identity of this cloaked figure, and made his way to the hotel, only to see Reaper emerging from the main entrance. After Karambit introduced himself as a Draculist, Reaper immediately verified the truth of that statement, asking the agent who had sent him and from where he had come, to which Karambit answered with an explanation The Cabal of Dracula and Mount Hagen in New Guinea, taking care to do so quietly so as not to draw any ire, especially following Reaper's recent actions. With this latter thought in mind, the pair soon decided to leave Dhaka post-haste, embarking on a train bound for southern Thailand.

On board the shaking locomotive, Karambit further explained the situation to Reaper, who grew increasingly excited about the prospect of taking control of The Coral Empire, and completing the omnicide of the apes. But first, The Cabal needed 2 things. First was control of the empire, but the second was far more challenging, as they required a second sample of smallpox. And with the first one spent long ago, the only other place that harbored the re-exterminated virus was Russia, whose territories were either controlled by The Snow-mads or The Enterprise of the Black Sea. And it was highly unlikely that the former were organized enough to even locate the virus, much less modify and release it. Leaving The Cabal only 2 other possibilities. Either the virus had been destroyed or it was in the hands of The Belugas, a prospect that was worse still. But before any of this could be considered, they needed to wrestle control of The Coral Empire away from Emperor Neil I, a task not so lightly taken on.

--Part II

As the Dracusits travelled back to Mount Hagen, events abroad were making their future task more difficult.

Back in The Lordship of the Ganges, The Khans had been notified of their member's murder and had sent word to Emperor Neil that their suspect, that they had discovered via the informant paid by Karambit, had fled to The Coral Empire and was a suspected Draculist. But even after torturing the informant to death in Kolkata's dungeons, The Khans had no inkling as to the murderer's true identity. However, Emperor Neil was nothing if not overconfident, and had 20 different "suspected" Draculists rounded up from Port Moresby and summarily executed on charges of murder, with one other being extradited to The Lordship where he was brought before Lord Amir. Having no reason to doubt this man's guilt, Amir was satisfied with his prisoner, as he too was ignorant of the murderer's face. At least, that is what he came to believe, as Emperor Neil was considered to be a friend of his, and Amir refused to doubt his honesty. The accused was subsequently executed by elephant, his head crushed like a pineapple under the towering creature's column-like foot. And that, as far as the royals were concerned, was the end of the matter.

-

Meanwhile, far to the west, The Enterprise of the Black Sea was troubled at the news of a Khan being killed, in a hotel room no less. The Enterprise was strongly economically tethered to The Lordship of the Ganges, due to that kingdom being the only one close to them connected by land, with all other areas around The Black Sea being controlled by Snow-mads and Berbers. And a dead future Khan meant potential loss of revenue for The Belugas. Luckily for them, House Khan had 7 more members to succeed Amir, so no one in the Beluga leadership panicked. Still, they were concerned, and sent a message to Kolkata, stating that since they were connected through strong trade relations, they would intervene on behalf of House Khan, should an incident such as this repeat itself. This turn of affairs only further complicated the situation in Eurasia if The Draculists were to take over The Coral Empire, as the friendship of the 2 monarchs was now one of several factors to be considered in their strategy for the omnicide, with the probable likelihood of The Belugas possessing the last sample of smallpox left in the entire world, as this was previously housed within the walls of The VECTOR Institute, near the Kazakh border. Once he and Karambit arrived in Mount Hagen, Reaper proposed an alternative strategy to The Cabal, which was two-fold. After their takeover of The Coral Empire, Emperor Neil would be captured and held for ransom. After this, they would contact his friend, Lord Amir, and pressure him to broker a trade between The Enterprise of the Black Sea and The Draculists, Neil for the smallpox. But first, they needed confirmation that The Beluga's actually had it, and that it wasn't destroyed. And this would be far more complicated to pull off, by comparison. How were they to determine the preservation of the virus without alerting The Belugas to their intentions? The answer was complex and multi-faceted. If The Enterprise was attacked by a threatening-enough kingdom, then the prospect of biological warfare could present itself. So little defensible land lay around The Black Sea's vicinity, that it would prove instrumental in pushing The Belugas to reveal their hand, using the virus as leverage against the aggressor to force a peace. With their target acquired, The Draculists would then pounce on

Emperor Neil. In short, the solution to their dilemma was to goad the world to the brink of war. And across The Pacific Ocean, there was a prime opportunity for this strategy to take shape.

The north american countries of Laramidia and Appalachia, named for their Cretaceous counterparts, were nearly at war already, having been created in the wake of a brutal civil conflict that had completely bisected the once unified nation. The western nation was ruled by a mad king named Carlos Estovo. And it was his psychopathy that The Cabal would use as their pawn. If the madman could be made to win his eternal war with Appalachia, he could then be anticipated to want more. And thus, could be reasonably convinced to pursue that goal in earnest, intoxicated by the narcotic of absolute victory. With this quirk in mind, and being newly appointed leader of the Cabal of Dracula, Reaper sent several agents to North America to manipulate the Laramidian leader, and eliminate the leadership of the other.

-

The voyage of the 3 agents, codenamed Dart, Martyr, and Sickle, was long and exhausting, having to stowaway onboard a cargo vessel bound for Appalachia from The Coral Empire, a strategy of concealment used by Dracula during his journey. With The Panama Canal remaining in operation, despite the smallpox, the Papuan cargo companies were not permitted by Emperor Neil to make contact, or even landfall, with Laramidia, as it remained diplomatically isolated due to the more than questionable tendencies of King Estovo. But this complicated trade with Appalachia, whose current ruler was a man by the name of Zacharia Buchanon, who only held his monarchical position thanks to a collection of 7 electors, whose vote, alone, determined their sitting king. As a result, the mission of The Draculists would prove to become even more complicated than anticipated, as a multitude of targets would need to be taken out simultaneously. And with only 3 agents charged with completing it, the task would require some measure of creativity on their part. But Reaper possessed this trait in spades, having been the sole architect of the train attack in Dhaka. So killing a collection of 7 people was not quite so difficult for him to concoct a method for. But before any of this could be achieved, The Draculists would need to successfully pass through The Panama Canal.

The Canal was controlled by an extortionist profiteer known only by the name of Jorge, whose thief-thronged racket saw its opportunity for an extremely lucrative business proposition in the Post-Viral age. As the nation of Panama fell to the chaos of the titular Viral Age, Jorge and his syndicate, nicknamed “The Outfit”, capitalized on this power vacuum and took control of The Canal, becoming its de-facto leaders and extorting any ships that passed through the crucial choke-point. As a result, The Outfit held considerable political sway in the region, most notably in Appalachia, to the point where the country was leveraged into shipping criminals to The Canal to work as slaves to maintain the waterway. Jorge also had a tendency to abduct the illegal members of a ship’s crew for the same purpose, as there was a high turnover rate of his slaves

due to the countless deaths of those workers. Needless to say, The Draculists were slightly on edge upon their arrival to the canal. However, Reaper had considered this potentiality and had secretly paid Jorge off prior to the voyage, and was assured that his 3 agents would pass through Panama, unimpeded. But Jorge was not told of the reasons for their passage, and had decided to capture them for his army of slaves on their return journey through the watery fissure.

The Canal was successfully cleared without incident, and the cargo vessel made its way through The Caribbean Sea, landing in Miami, Florida 4 days later. But in the Post-Viral Age, Miami had been so depopulated by the smallpox that it was reduced to a tiny hamlet, pressed into a thin line of houses and ruined buildings between The Everglades, which were fully recovered in just 5 years of freedom, and The Atlantic Ocean. The sole harbor in the diminished city was a small, crumbling concrete jetty extending into the water. Onto which, the agents leaped after butchering the entire crew aboard the ship, just like their founder had in Melbourne nearly a decade earlier. But unlike that monolithic metropolis, Miami at this time was wholly incapable of investigating this sort of incident despite the carnage. So Dart, Martyr, and Sickle fled the hamlet, scott-free.

-

The journey north was inconvenient, to say the least, as the roads to Florida had nearly all been overgrown, due to the cull and the reluctance of the surviving population to move south. The citizens of Appalachia mainly resided in the north-eastern portion of the country. The capital city had even been switched from Washington DC to New York City, whose buildings, while significantly diminished, were, nonetheless, still intact, convincing most of the remaining population to flood into the city in the wake of its depopulation, like the extinction of a domineering species leaving open niches for those that could successfully exploit them. Within New York, often rendered to simply York, stood the Empire State Building, which now functioned as the royal palace for the king, as well as premium housing for the 7 electors of Appalachia. The skyscraper was also one of only a few left standing in the entire world of the Post-Viral Age, as the rest had fallen into disrepair almost immediately following the world's depopulation, leaving upright only those buildings that could be maintained reasonably well. One of these was The tallest building in York, now renamed Empire Tower by the electors who lived almost permanently within its walls. And it was this last factor, more than any, that determined Reaper's strategy.

-

Smuggling explosives through The Panama Canal using the bribed connections on The Outfit, Reaper was arming Sickle, Martyr, and Dart with heaps of ammonium nitrate, gathered from around The Coral Empire. The Demon's Shadow then forwarded the idea to Sickle, who was soon appointed head of the mission in Appalachia. Sickle then directed the other 2 agents to

begin constructing proper bombs at their new headquarters in one of Appalachia's largest cities, Boston, not far from their target.

While the team in Appalachia were building their bombs, across the border, in Laramidia, Reaper had sent a just single agent, disguised as a prospective advisor to King Carlos Estovo, who had been in the market for a new one for months after the old one had been flayed alive in the local city park for treason. But honesty was not this agent's mission. She had been tasked with convincing Carl that the other team in Appalachia was working on something to decapitate the leadership, and thus pry the country open for an invasion from the west. The agent's codename was Dagger, and she had successfully been granted entry into Laramidia by Carl, himself, who saw this young attractive woman as a potential conquest, which is exactly what Reaper had been counting on. Of course, Dagger understood the psychology of the man she'd come to manipulate, and had no qualms about doing so. At the same time Sickle and his team were passing through The Panama Canal, Dagger was landing in the Laramidian capital of Los Angeles, which had become a congested hive of layered houses due to King Carlos' refusal to endorse new housing projects that did not build upward, as he wished to outpace the Appalachian capital of York and its Empire Tower. As a result, Los Angeles was a modern Kowloon, a lasagna of buildings and alcoves piled atop one another in a comparatively small area. The King however, resided in his royal palace, far from the main city, where his predilections were inflicted upon the countless hapless victims of his twisted desires. The condition for Dagger though, was that she not become subject to these tendencies, so as to advise him effectively. And to this, Carlos agreed. But as Dagger entered the palace, the king momentarily reconsidered his agreement not to touch her.

In Appalachia, Sickle and his team had finished the explosive ordnance, and were shifting their focus to their delivery to Empire Tower. After managing to hijack a total of 4 cargo vans, butchering their occupants to do so, the team packed 3 of the vehicles with as many ammonium nitrate bombs as could fit, and drove southwards into York under the cover of night. And in Laramidia, after seducing Carlos, Dagger informed him of the team on the other side of the border and of their mission to decapitate his rival. She then convinced him to attack Appalachia after Sickle, Dart, and Martyr had succeeded. Blinded by his lust and his greed, King Estovo agreed to the strategy, completely unaware of Dagger's protocol to kill him after Reaper had confirmed the existence of the smallpox virus in the possession of The Belugas.

--Part III

At 10 am in York, a sudden and powerful explosion ripped through the foundations of Empire Tower, killing dozens of workers and civilians in the surrounding area. An hour later, the entire tower collapsed, killing King Zachariah and wiping out the 7 electors in one fell swoop. The 3 agents then raced back south to Miami using a 4th cargo van they had saved for their escape.

Meanwhile, Dagger informed King Carlos that Appalachia's leadership had been eliminated by her compatriots, and suggested that he attack immediately. Luckily for her, Carlos had already been preparing for another border incursion for several months, and simply transferred more troops from other areas of the country to assist, turning what would have been just another incursion into a full-scale invasion of Appalachia. Then he ordered a general advance to take the capital.

It was over in weeks, for the Appalachian military was crippled by the lack of leadership and was easily brushed aside by the centralized platoons of the Laramidian forces. After they conquered the city of York, they declared King Carlos Estovo the new American Emperor, and invited him to see his newly conquered city. Carlos eagerly accepted, and travelled eastward to survey the wreckage with Dagger by his side, the second greatest conquest of Estovo's career, as he so often said.

However, in the Caribbean, the team of 3 was in a considerably bad situation. After their departure from Miami aboard another cargo ship, they again had to pass through the Panama Canal. But The Outfit had already decided that these secret agents were worth more to them alive and imprisoned on their terms. So when the ship was halted to extort the captain, several of the syndicate's employees boarded the vessel and kidnapped Sickle, Dart, and Martyr, who were then brought to Jorge who chose to have Dart killed by hanging him bove the canal. The other 2, he simply imprisoned in his mansion, closer to the coast.

In Mount Hagen, Reaper soon received a call from Jorge, demanding a considerable sum of money to release the 2 agents. But to this, Reaper just laughed into the receiver, then hung up. He and the team members understood that any price was worth paying for a better world, and so would die if necessary, as long as the mission was fulfilled. Jorge then hung the last 2 Draculists alongside Dart, their carcasses left dangling above the artificial canyon.

In York, Emperor Carlos Estovo had decided to further expand his new kingdom, persuaded to do so by Dagger, who told him of the vast wealth hoarded by The Enterprise of the Black Sea, just across the ocean from where they were. Carl, ever the fool, excitedly agreed and began the construction of an armada and sent a message to The Belugas that read, *Good Riddance to Appalachia! If you wish to join them in the ashes of history, then I suggest you refuse my claim to all of us that remain alive! -Sincerely, Emperor Carlos Estovo I, Ruler of the First American Empire, and Ruler of All Mankind!* Though they wished to spit upon such a decree, The Belugas had seen what Estovo had done to the members of the Appalachian military who had survived his brief invasion, very publicly flaying them alive on camera, and sending the footage to The Enterprise alongside the provocative letter. Wishing not to follow their example of failure, The Belugas secretly suggested that they use “the weapon” as leverage to force peace with Carlos. The rest of the leadership concurred, collectively deciding to threaten a second pandemic by declaring their possession of the last sample of the smallpox virus, taken from the vaults of The VECTOR Institute years earlier as a response to Dracula’s world-shattering attack. When The Enterprise of the Black Sea was founded, after Russia had ceased to exist, its leaders had sent a clandestine team to secure the apocalyptic vial, so as to avoid anyone else weaponizing the *variola.* However, the current leader of The Belugas, Lord Tamash Jalin, was in a bind and needed to act decisively. And with the psychopathic Emperor Estovo knocking at his door, Tamash needed to use every asset he could gather, the biggest of which was the smallpox sample. And so, in a daring move, he publicly presented the vial of *variola* on video, as if to counteract the footage delivered to him by Carl, and likewise, sent it to the emperor.

Dagger, being the official advisor, was the first one in America to receive this message. And upon discovering its contents, she beamed with anticipation. Reaper had been right. And even better, she was now ordered to kill Carl Estovo, something that she’d been wanting to do ever since her first meeting with the idiotic and overconfident ruler that she had come to manipulate. But first, she sent the envelope containing the video to Mount Hagen, without informing Emperor Carlos, then made her way to the new Imperial headquarters, located in a freshly converted mansion, just beyond the city limits, to give Carlos her gift. She slashed his throat later that evening. However, during her escape, Dagger was killed by the guards who’d witnessed her fleeing the room, connected the dots, and simply shot her dead. But her mission had already been accomplished, as the package of proof had successfully made it out of the country on a mail ship, bound for Port Moresby.

Reaper was later notified of Dagger’s death. To The Cabal though, all payment was worth the price, as believed by all of its members. And after opening her package in Mount Hagen, Reaper fully accepted the value of his agents’ successes.

---Calakmul---

Rising from the ever-green canopy of Chixulub's tomb, a stone mountain pierces through the sea of trees. Named for the serpent lords who commissioned its construction, The Snake Kingdom has long since returned to the blessed coils of the beings that its citizens worshipped. And the great Kukulkan smiles as the serpents reclaim their rule, and all's finally right with the jungle's greatest city.

---A Home for the Needy---

The decrepit apartment building had been small, and unassuming. But as the man crept through the blood-stained halls of that butcher's shop, the feeling of dread swept over his body, as if the iron tongue of winter had just briefly touched his back, and his slight hair erected itself in shock. And no more was this feeling as prevalent and as unrelenting as when he entered the basement, where the door opened up to a white padded room, drenched in the putrefied offal of human dead. 850 bodies were pulled from the place. Some were prostitutes, some were welfare cooks, but one was a priest, whose carcass bore only one wound, that of a single gunshot straight to the temple, accompanied by a .44 magnum revolver clutched in his cold dead fingers.

The name given to the priest at birth was unreflective of who he had become. As such, Brother Billy had been his identity ever since his conversion to Christianity 12 years before. But in that time, he'd never exhibited any symptoms of true belief, rather he expressed the sordid qualities of sadism while shielding his transgressions behind the white cloak of piety.

-

In 2006, he had purchased the failing apartment building after learning of the transients that stayed there. Disgusted by them and by the prostitutes who lay there with their clientele, Billy set about his mission to wipe them all out. Gathering a number of other like-minded employees, he then opened the doors to any and all unfortunate souls, drawing in dozens with his rhetoric about "giving back to the community" and his distribution of free food and lodging from within those hallowed halls. Billy was soon being hailed as a champion of the poor, a man who generously gifted them all a free place to stay and free meals round-the-clock. However, as is so often the case with humanity, few things given by them are ever truly free. And it was in the dark of night that Brother Billy and his employees would exact their unseen price. As the building slept, they would sneak into a previously chosen room and silently abduct the tenants while they were unconscious, and drag them into the basement where Billy had lined the walls with white

padding to muffle the sounds of screams and roaring of power tools. After a full night of unrelenting torture and dismemberment, the body parts would be taken upstairs to the kitchens, prepared, and served as food. And the resulting recurrent vacancies would forever create new opportunities for fresh victims to stay at the building for “free”.

Eventually though, the authorities did catch the whiff of death, noticing the extremely high turnover rate, outpacing everywhere else in the city. It was then that Brother Billy was given a tip about a coming police raid, courtesy of a search warrant thrust to the police department by a former tenant whose husband had suddenly disappeared from his room while she went out the same night. The city officials thought this report to be enough evidence to issue the warrant to search the property, after Brother Billy refused to cooperate with investigators who arrived there in response to the missing person case.

After the raid, a photographer with a local news outlet was granted permission to survey the building after it was revealed that all of the individuals within its wall had been killed, most of them with machetes, meat cleavers, and knives of varying degrees. All except one, whose body was hauled out from the top floor, with a gunshot wound to his head, and a .44 magnum in his cold dead fingers.

---Mythos-To Destroy One's Self---

The snow pierced his nerves and numbed him to the bones. But that cold was never enough. Not for someone who had been burned as thoroughly as he had. As he and his Siberian guide hiked through the winter snows, the latter was completely ignorant of the former's determination and the sheer lengths to which he would travel to never be hurt like that again.

Several hours later, the pair came upon their destination, the long-ruined hamlet of Nazino, just off of the bank of The Ob River. There, they managed to salvage a small boat from one of the crumbling wooden buildings. And as they repaired it, the pained young man thought about his longing, and the psychological torture of being cast aside and forgotten by the woman he'd come to love. A woman that he'd thought had come to love him in return, but chose another, even though she'd spent the past few years convincing him that he'd been chosen out of thousands. And when she tossed him aside at the first sign of a better prospect, caring nothing for the wreckage she'd left behind, the young man had become clinically depressed. Yet, this leech never once detached himself from the host body of life. Instead, after hearing of the strange events of 2012 in Siberia, and after learning of the identities of the monsters responsible for the grisly episodes, he decided that they would be his solution to his torturous equilibrium. And so, he hired the guide from Vladivostok to take him to where it all began, that morbid island of deadly spirits that were laced throughout the forested swampland like a natural toxin, always watching and waiting for one of depravity and desperation to stoop to a level of usefulness to the natural world, to abandon the vanity of humanity, and become a manifestation of its evil. A creature that could feel nothing, despite its deep wounds and expulsion of black blood. And it was into one of these fabled creatures that this man transformed after he and his guide successfully repaired the boat, rowed to the island across the ice-choked river, a swift stab to the guide's back with a pocket knife, and a taste of his flesh. With the killer's maw painted with the blood of his own species, the Spirits of Nazino Island found their next prey and created another wendigo, just one other. A being that soon swam The Ob back to the hamlet and took off into the frozen dark of Siberia's near-endless winter. A being that began to kill humans, ceaselessly in pursuit of a hunger that could never be sated. A deep black hole that could never be filled, and a monster that did all that it could to do so without feeling a thing. The initial pain of the icy wind, burning out all that once suffered, now numb to the pain, and ageless, as it remained forever cursed.

---The Imagined One---

She had done it. She'd left. But I wasn't angry, just disappointed. Disappointed that I wasn't good enough for her. But after she walked outside and shut the door behind her, I shook myself out of my stupor. And it took a moment in the real world to realize that I was already alone. And that I had been alone the entire time.

---Mythos-The Proclivities of Rednecks and Their Scions---

They are creatures of amorality, products of hollow, sordid worlds, and scions of sisters. And from the blackened, fetid cavities of their unfortunate births, they are warped further into perversions of humanity. And they are raised to do one thing, and one thing only. Destroy. They wear the flayed skins of those they kill like the twisted trophies of serial killers and bleed utter contempt for their victims like the common criminals that they truly are. They are the brood of the squalor that belched them, and on they live in defiance of their depraved and vile personalities, as all who walk in their orbit would be forever grateful for their lives to end, painfully, terribly, with a sprawling mess of gore and offal for the crows to feast upon. Their bones should be cracked upon the teeth of all carnivores that have not been killed by their own knives, guns, and pitchforks. Their hounds should devour them alive. They should be slaughtered like the livestock that they have so much contempt for, and be butchered like their meat. They would be better served if their bloody parts were served to all who hate them as much as I do. For it was within his mind that these thoughts occurred. Ramsay the Ghost, The Redneck Killer.

Jeremy Dickinson was one such caricature of these redneck creatures, these “Texas Boys”. Though, he in fact resided in Tennessee, near Nashville, and sucked upon the nipple of his younger sister, Lisa Lindsay-Dickinson, like the degenerate he was. And from her abused womb, were upchucked twins of the most detestable variety. They were raised under the fetid banner of a twisted Christian cult, run by the creature that expunged his seed from which the noxious weeds sprouted like a fungal infection latching itself upon a corpse. These things, these twins, fast became like their ogre of a father, merciless towards other living things, and obnoxious in their self-righteousness. Constance and Jeremy Jr. Dickinson were both the very definition of redneck scions, garbage-made-flesh.

-

One evening, after returning home with a large sack of headless ducks taken from a neighbor's breeding farm, the kids embraced their father and eagerly awaited their answer to the question they had asked him the night before. Jeremy then declared his approval for the proposed trip to Sweetwater, Texas for the orgy of violence that these things wanted to see so desperately. And the little creatures cheered. The next morning, Jeremy rounded up his entire family, packed the pickup truck for a 5 day trip, and with the kids sitting on the roof, as the cab and bed lacked room enough for all, the Dickinsons headed out west to the bloated corpse of Sweetwater, whose population spread like a deadly black mould, as the blood-drenched festivals of Yahweh began.

The beings of Sweetwater were twisted, amorphous abominations. Warped into semi-living carcasses via their religious beliefs. Legend has it that they were once humans. But their priests struck a deal with their god, Yahweh, the deity whose humor at the expense of his devotees knew no bounds. The priests and their followers asked Yahweh for the power to purge the life that they hated from their town, to which the deity responded by sending a witch blessed with his powers to give the people what they wanted. And so, the witch placed a curse upon Sweetwater's inhabitants. This curse was immunity to the venom of those that they wished to exterminate, the western diamondback rattlesnakes. To keep this protection however, the inhabitants must kill a number of the reptiles in accordance with their own population at that time once every single year. But with every dead snake, the people became more and more distorted, body and mind, into gaunt and grotesque monstrosities. A price they thought was worth paying for their own species. As a result, the warped beings of Sweetwater knew no mercy, no love, and no compassion. And they now spent their days hunting and killing any rattlesnake that crossed their path. And these living gifts were eventually driven from the land of Sweetwater, leaving its inhabitants as the aberrations that they always had been. Perversions of humanity, reflective of the monstrous intentions with which they'd dealt with Yahweh. A god that never spoke to them again after his witch disappeared in a veil of fog.

-

The creatures had an extreme lust for deep-fried food. So much so, that they had taken to holding a series of festivals where those in attendance could compete for the title of "top frier", and the winner would be granted the "honor" of killing the first rattlesnake of the titular "butchering season", whose opening and closing celebrations ended with an town-wide orgy amidst the spattered guts of all of the living things that they had killed, and fornicating each other with objects of every description while coating their own bodies the acrid mud of the area. These festivals were also frequented by thousands of similarly depraved humans from across the far lands of North America. Needless to say, the inhabitants of Sweetwater were unforgivably revolting. A fetid pile of offal and dung whose odor had not gone unnoticed by one individual of equal mercilessness and callousness, but one who directed these traits toward the only animals on Earth to actually deserve them being inflicted.

Ramsay had followed Jeremy Dickinson and his evil exploits for a long while now, and was just about to pounce on him, when he'd overheard his intentions to bring the family to Sweetwater. And it was then that an enticing idea had entered his mind, to finally extinguish this contagion, once and for all. To kill the noxious redneck weed at source. So, with as much ricin as he could carry, Ramsay made the trip westward, following his hapless prey, as a komodo dragon would follow a wounded buffalo.

-

Ramsay had come up with the most appropriately cold-blooded idea for revenge. An idea that came into view as he approached the rotting wooden gates of Sweetwater, and thereafter, successfully entered the Top Frier Competition. So dense were the beings of Sweetwater, that they vacantly stared off into the foul air, not bothering to search his vehicle. Not that The Ghost needed to be concerned with this though, as stupidity was a gift that his various enemies were rather generous with. Ramsay was then provided with a stove, cooking utensils, and 2 hours to prepare a feast for the judgement of all who were present at the festival. Ramsay began to unpack his vehicle and added 20 ounces of purified ricin to the frying batter. Ramsay then gathered a second ingredient for his revenge, several large sacks of fertilizer mixed with ammonium nitrate, packing them into several-dozen bottles of Everclear. The Ghost then disappeared from the area, slithering off into the empty streets, as all of the town's residents were in attendance of the festivals.

Eventually, the sun was cast down over the horizon, and the cook-off began in earnest. Suddenly, an explosion rang out from the other side of the fairgrounds, catching the attention of the beings, giving Ramsay yet another gift. The gift of an easily distracted batch of targets. He then slinked about the other 4 teams' makeshift kitchens and laced their food with a second vial of ricin. And before they all returned to their previous places, he made his way back to his cooking station.

-

Meanwhile, Jeremy Dickinson toured the countless booths, amused at the rattlesnake carcasses hanging from the meathooks of these market stalls. It was then, while he was perusing these slaughterhouses, that he felt a sudden prick upon the side of his neck. His vision began to blur, and the redneck was sent deep into unconsciousness. The same was done to Lisa, Constance, and Jeremy Jr. And again, Ramsay was served with the courtesy of the being's collective stupidity and vacancy, as they all passed over his prey, like the mindless herd that they all truly were. Ramsay wanted his main target to suffer, and so sought to prevent him taking part in the cook-off, where all of the other festival-goers were irresistibly drawn. In particular, towards the myriad of deep-fried food, of which, Ramsay's looked the most appetizing to their drooling maws. In accordance with this insatiable lust, the fetid beings all but inhaled every scrap of food that had been entered into the contest. All of which, The Ghost had tainted under the mask of the bomb that had swept his targets' attention. The killing was swift and brutal. As the festival-goers all dropped like flies that had just eaten the poisoned carcasses that they had seen as their own, their wretched little bodies violently convulsing to death. And once Sweetwater became a graveyard, The Ghost implemented the next piece of his jigsaw puzzle, and located the sleeping forms of Jeremy Dickinson and his scions.

Jeremy awoke with his arms tied to the walls on either side of his position, orienting his body in

the shape of a letter “T”. His wife and children were in front of him, bound, gagged, and crying for help. But Jeremy had also been silenced with cloth, and could not comfort them. However, what truly troubled him was the machete leaning on the far right wall within the small, dark room, and the lawnmower on the other side.

Ramsay’s dark silhouette then came through the doorway, with an orange glow emanating from behind him. Jeremy then began to shake when Ramsay brought the lawnmower next to Lisa and pulled the cord, activating its rotating blades. Constance and Jeremy Jr. then both began to cry hysterically as The Ghost angled the mower so that the spinning maw of the lawnmower was facing slightly forward, then pushed the machine towards Lisa’s feet after violently shoving her to the ground and forcing her to face upward so that she was looking at the ceiling, so that her children and husband could see her face through it all. The blades then started to cut Lisa Lindsay to pieces from the feet-up, as if it were eating the woman alive. The children screamed in panic as Jeremy tried to yell and curse through his gag as the floor was coated in Lisa’s thick, chunky blood, flecking about the room with shards of bone and strips of tendon and muscle. But as the rotors connected with her pelvic bones, Ramsay stopped the hungry machine. With a nearby blowtorch, he cauterized the massive wound, letting her suffer for a little while longer. Then, he turned his attention towards the children. Ramsay drew his knife and slashed their throats, one at a time, leaving a gap within these strokes of vengeance within which his victims could understand the gravity of their malice’s price before their own were exacted. Ramsay then reactivated the mower, and finally finished Lisa off, only letting her head remain in one piece. He then ruthlessly grasped it by its blonde hair and beat Jeremy to a bloody pulp with it. However, the redneck was forbidden to die just yet. Ramsay casually dropped the severed head of Jeremy’s wife to the floor, picked up the machete, and brutally cut Jeremy’s arms from his body, letting his torso fall to the ground while his bloody limbs each fell to the sides of the room, painting the walls as they made contact with them. However, even this did not kill Jeremy, all in accordance with Ramsay’s intentions. The Ghost then knelt down to his prey, and whispered something into his ear, something that Jeremy found so distressing that he began to bawl as soon as the venomous words left the air. Finally satisfied, Ramsay then held the machete above Jeremy’s head, and brought it down, separating his head from his body, flooding the floor with that oh so satisfying layer of deep red organic liquid. Jeremy Dickinson’s head was then flayed, impaled, and planted in front of the rotting wooden gates of Sweetwater, a town that was now engulfed in enormous flames that kissed the starry night sky. The Ghost had set the entire town alight in the wake of his escape. And with the deaths of every being in the town, his massacre had broken the curse of Yahweh, and had set free the rattlesnakes of Sweetwater. And as Ramsay disappeared into the darkness of the night once again, with fire in his wake, another small portion of the world had been liberated from the clutches of humanity, and their victims had, once again, been avenged.

---Chased by Them---

They are always there-
And they will never leave him alone-

Chasing him-
Owning him-
And torturing him-

No matter what he does-
No matter where he goes-
No matter who he finds-

They will always find him-

At least-
As long as they’re alive-

A state of affairs-
The he finally corrected-

And now-
He is free-

Never to be chased-
By them-
Again-

---The Omnicide Saga---

--Fear the Reaper--

--Part I

The Demon's Shadow presented Dagger's information to the rest of The Cabal of Dracula, revealing the possession of the last vial of smallpox by The Enterprise of the Black Sea. At last, could the work of Dracula be possible, and his legacy fulfilled.

-

America was now in chaos, not unlike the other countless power vacuums that followed Dracula's actions. But as far as his successor was concerned, that fallen nation no longer mattered, as he now had the information he had been looking for. And he was soon going to use it to finish what Dracula had begun so many years ago.

-

With the revelation that The Enterprise of the Black Sea possessed the last vial of *variola,* Reaper summoned the entire Cabal to a meeting in Mount Hagen to draw up the strategy to, once again, take control of The Coral Empire. Realizing the approach taken by Dracula would not be viable a second time, a more devious strategy would need to be implemented. It was decided that members of The Cabal would disguise themselves as bounty hunters, and Reaper would pose as their prisoner, as Emperor Neil still had no idea as to the appearance of The Riverine Dragon's successor. And with his ever-useful reluctance to murdering his political enemies, simply opting to imprison them instead, the emperor could be deceived. In addition to this new idea, Neil's purges throughout the Post-Viral Age had seen countless people thrown into various prisons dotted around the vicinity of Port Moresby. Therefore, these hives of suppression would, again, serve as excellent fuel for The Draculists' fire. However, they would need to convince these inmates to support them. And once the Draculists had taken power, they could then use them as the next iteration of The Capital Army, a loyal secret police force, with which The Draculists could maintain control of the empire until they enacted the second omnicide of the apes.

Inside The Imperial Palace, Emperor Neil sat at his desk pondering his latest decrees when an attendant burst into the room and declared that Reaper, Dracula's protege, had been captured from The Lordship of the Ganges by a band of bounty hunters who were looking to acquire a

place in The New Capital Army. Surprised and elated by this news, Neil commanded the attendant to let them all in, as he would soon greet the “heroes” in the throne room.

--Part II

Reaper had been bound and gagged, but was covertly given a small knife by the clandestine Draculists, who convincingly dragged him into the throne room of Port Moresby, the same place where he had attempted to kill Dracula, before the former had become a different person. Reaper had no recollection of that night however, and was fully committed to completing the mission driven into his mind by Dracula. The Emperor then entered the room and immediately ordered that Reaper be brought to a cell, located within the palace. The Draculists were then granted their reward and were appointed to The New Capital Army. All according to the strategy.

-

The recruits were all ordered to patrol the various parts of the palace, so as for the emperor to keep an eye on them. That done, Neil went to Reaper’s cell. Upon meeting him, Neil inquired as to how many Draculists there were in Mount Hagen, to which Reaper responded by claiming that there were none, as far as the emperor knew. And Neil, believing the prisoner to be deceiving him, panicked upon seeing Reaper’s twisted smile, and immediately sent a large detachment of The New Capital Army to occupy Mount Hagen, then root out and kill every last Draculist in that city. The only exceptions to this order were the newest recruits to the army, who were to remain in the capital to keep order, as Neil trusted them not yet. As his captor left the cell, Reaper began to quietly laugh to himself, regarding Neil’s stupidity, as if this trait of his had not served The Cabal well enough.

-

A few hours later, one of the Draculists, codenamed Razor, appeared at the cell and asked Reaper if the time had come. In response, Reaper gave a slight shake of his head, and told her to wait until The New Capital Army had become thin enough for them to launch a coup from within the ranks of the secret police. She then nodded and returned to her assigned patrol.

Razor hailed from Patna, in The Lordship of the Ganges, and was a recent convert to Draculism, as her Renewalist past had taken a toll on her mind, nearly leading to her death. Her last boyfriend had tried to kill her after he’d become jealous of one of her male friends and stabbed him to death in his sleep. In response, Razor slipped a kitchen knife into her ex’s body, just before his baseball bat met her head. Being that her ex was a staunch Renewalist and constantly espoused its merits, Razor wished to separate herself from him, and so began to

study Draculism, falling in love with the man who had created it, whom she'd vicariously met within its teachings. But once she joined The Cabal of Dracula, she came to greatly admire Dagger, but disliked her use of seduction for her assassinations. Razor preferred to manipulate her targets via political discourse and intimidation, using the threat of death to leverage them. The perfect arsenal of traits to help complete the omnicide.

Several days after Reaper's imprisonment, the other Draculists had been assigned to guard the many prisons of Port Moresby as a promotion, given that the Mount Hagen campaign was going nowhere. With this lack of progress, Emperor Neil had ordered the resident guards to join the others in that city, further stripping his capital of experienced soldiers. And as a consequence, those empty spots needed to be filled in by the new guards. And so, they were ordered to do just that, and were all given the increasingly difficult job of managing the city and its various prisons, about which Neil was most concerned, given the decreased number of capital troops in the city. And just like that, the pieces fell into place. The Draculists were now in nigh-complete control of the capital city, with the emperor alone in his palace.

-

Razor reported this state of affairs to Reaper, who was still in his cell. Due to her unique usefulness and her close physical proximity to him, Razor was becoming increasingly indispensable to Reaper, who was considering her as his potential successor, should he be killed. But in time, the wild goose chase that he had sent Neil on in Mount Hagen would peter out, and Reaper would need to initiate the takeover before The New Capital Army knew what was happening. With this in mind, he called for Razor and declared that the time for their takeover had come. Thereafter, Razor forwarded the call to all of the remaining Draculists guarding the city's prisons, armories, and government buildings.

---

8 hours later, the capital was under Dracula's Black flag.

--Part III

Reaper was released from his cell that same afternoon, and into it was thrown the former Emperor Neil. The coup had been a walkover. Reaper had learned much from Dracula, including his knowledge of coups and how to successfully execute them.

Neil had been unforgivably naive and far too trusting of his new recruits. But like so many other rulers throughout history, his biggest motivator was unrelenting fear. Fear that his enemies used as a weapon, to devastating effect. The New capital Army, still in Mount Hagen, had noticed the contact blackout of Port Moresby, and had decided to withdraw from their current objective and survey the situation in the capital. But by that time, Port Moresby was already under Reaper's control, as the countless prisoners had been released by the Draculist guards, under the condition that they convert to their cause, to which nearly all agreed. Those that refused to renounce Renewalism were summarily executed by the converts, who were ordered to do so by the guards to solidify their commitment. Then, the city was violently brought to heel, followed by the arrest of Emperor Neil, who was sleeping at the time of his capture. He was subsequently tortured by Razor, then imprisoned within the same cell into which Reaper had been locked. All within a mere 8 hours. That night, Reaper was crowned the third Emperor of The Coral Empire, finally ruled by Dracuilists, once again.

Following the coup, The New Capital Army was quickly rounded up near Mount Hagen and violently purged, with its members either being killed soon after their arrest, or captured, brought back to the capital, and tortured to death. All in all, Reaper's takeover of The Coral Empire had taken no longer than a day and a half. And with an extremely valuable hostage in his clutches, he could now focus his efforts on obtaining what he had needed all this time, the scythe with which he could exact his toll upon humanity. However, the rest of the empire reacted not well to this upheaval, and had taken it upon themselves to rebel against the capital. But this was foreseen by Reaper, who quickly dealt with them by strategically isolating and eliminating the scattered pockets of resistance in a country well-known for its geographically disconnected populations, whose ties had only weakened in the Viral Age cull, and so were easily wiped out. These crackdowns took place simultaneously, and were all completed in less than a week.

After his power was consolidated, Emperor Reaper then contacted Razor, naming her his official right hand and successor, for her utility during their coup and for her loyalty and dedication to the cause. Razor was honored, and vowed to continue to help make Dracula's wish a reality. And soon, she would acquire the opportunity, as news from South America reached The Coral Empire of a coming invasion from the world's largest armada, a knee-jerk reaction to the emergence of the newly Draculist state.

--Part IV

Reaper had made many enemies after installing himself as the third Emperor of The Coral Empire. In addition, The Enterprise of the Black Sea now grew nervous, knowing what had

happened the last time that a Draculist controlled that country, and were not eager for a repetition of The Viral Age, especially so soon after humanity had only just survived the first one. And now, with the world's population so disconnected and vulnerable, it was now or never for Lord Tamish Jalin, who still possessed the virus that nearly wiped out his entire species, to make a decision. However, he would not get the chance to mull over this affair for long, as he was delivered a message from The Lordship of the Ganges. The Coral Empire had shown its hand.

Reaper had given Lord Amir Khan an ultimatum, to either pressure The Belugas into handing over the smallpox, or his friend would be killed. Given The Lordship's vital connection to The Enterprise, the deal would leave them in a very vulnerable position. Being that the only other stable kingdom, Patagonia, was on its way towards full-scale war against The Coral Empire, and America was in complete chaos. This left The Enterprise with only one trading partner, a partner who would never forgive them for choosing the virus over its ruler's friend. Given these circumstances, The Belugas could not afford to outright refuse Reaper's demands, or destroy the virus. Amir was also backed into a corner, given that Neil was now a hostage in Port Moresby, and would certainly be killed if The Lordship attempted a rescue of any kind. And with all eyes on both of them, there was virtually no way to covertly spring Neil from the royal palace without being seen by the newly recycled Capital Army, now renamed "Dracula's Capital Army". Therefore, this tense standoff could only be broken by Patagonia, which was still in the process of mobilizing their military. And so, for now, the proverbial ball was in Tamish's court.

Reaper had given Tamish 2 weeks to come to a decision, thinking that the Patagonians would take longer than that to fully mobilize their forces and cross the Pacific. Within this time frame, he ordered Razor to cut small pieces from Neil's body and send them to Lord Amir as a ticking clock, signaling his friend's dwindling lifespan. This further put pressure upon Tamish to act, but his cabinet persisted in their resolve, refusing to crack and thereby invoke a second cull, one that could very well finish their species off. But the other side of this argument contended that refusing would not only cause an economic crisis with The Lordship of the Ganges, but may also contribute to a war of retaliation, waged by Amir, seeking revenge for Tamish's kingdom being unwilling to help his friend. And so, the deadlock continued. All the while, The Lordship received further pieces of Neil in boxes marked with the message, *Here's to another sliver of our waning patience. Your time is running out, as is his.* These boxes arrived once a day, each containing ever-larger body parts within them. The latest one actually held an entire left hand, whose palm was marked with the image of Dracula's Imperial flag, used during his brief rule over The Coral Empire. And now, it had been readopted by Reaper, being utilized as a calling card. The severed limb was also adorned with a ring that had been given to Neil as a gift of friendship by Amir, himself, on the day of the finalization of their kingdom's alliance not 3 years before. All of this was designed to apply as much indirect pressure to The Belugas as possible, in order to force a decision in 2 weeks, a deadline that was fast approaching, much to Reaper's

and Razor’s collectively increasing frustrations. All the while, the Patagonians came ever-closer to invading Port Moresby, as the Australians had at the end of the Pre-Viral Age.

---

2 days away from the deadline, Lord Tamish sat in his throne room in Istanbul, his head upon his hand. He had finally come to a decision. In his fist, he clasped the last of the *variola,* his nervous hand shaking as he held the tiny vial. Then, with all of the hesitation in the world, he slowly dropped the vial onto the marble floor, its splintering glass echoing across the empty room. Then, a foot came down over the bottle, and smashed it to pieces. And finally, to escape the gravity of what he'd just done, Tamish doused himself in oil and dropped something else, a flaming torch.

A few days later, after hearing the news, a large box came to Lord Amir’s palace. Nervously opening it, he fell to his knees in despair when its contents were revealed. For the box had concealed the shredded, bloody, and unrecognizable remains of Neil I.

---The Killer of Killers---

The boat of thorns-
The silver blades-

And upon their many points-
Skewered upon these-
Are impaled those who fin sharks-
And take-
With them-
Their profits-
Reaped in blood-

Like the secret police-
Of regimes-
That know not mercy-

Those who fin sharks-
Understand nothing-
Nothing but the profits-
Profits to be reaped-
Through the blood of the innocent-

They are pure evil-
They are those that deserve death-
But death comes not often enough for them-
And so they are left-
To reap the wheat-

Unless-
Of course-
There exist those of nobility-
Saviors of the other living things-
And those who do so-
By killing those who kill-

A killer of killers-
One to avenge the graceful sharks-
And one who leaves them to patrol their watery home in peace-

And it is in this one-
That the the graceful sharks-
Can place their trust-

As the one to save them-
Knows exactly how to communicate-
With those who fin sharks-

With the swift sickle of Death-
Itself-

Such is the phrasebook of killers-
That the only language that they understand-
Is the bloody language of death-
And so-
With death-
Shall the chosen one answer those who fin sharks-
Skewering their carcasses upon his many-thorned boat-

And the sharks-
Previously under their killers' knives-
Are fed the remains-
Of those that deserve death-

---The Ramsay Bolton Treatment---

Imagine it, you're tied to a chair in the dark, your face has been beaten to a pulp, and your former victim is staring you down through the bars of a cage door with a look of utter contempt. Nevertheless, you smile, as if the gravity of your situation has not yet reached you. Then, the growls echo through the small chamber into which you've been placed. And your hunting hounds, the ones to which you have fed your enemies, are now being turned upon you. One dog perches its forelimbs on your prone knees, licks the blood from your face as you helplessly try to command it. It drools at the prospect of alleviating its week-long starvation to which you've subjected it in the assumption of your victory over an army. The dog then grabs your jaw with its own, then rips it from your face, followed there by the others. It’s as if the ghosts of those you have fed to your dogs have gotten their revenge.

-

The scene described above is a personal fascination of mine. It comes from the television series, Game of Thrones. And this gory scenario closes the chapter of not only The Battle of the Bastards, in which the execution takes place, but also capps off the end of a multi-season journey of pain, suffering, and death, inflicted by the one who has been eaten alive by his own dogs.

-

I have lived most of my life with varying levels of cynophobia, a fear of dogs. And though harming one is despicable in my mind, and would be an unforgivable act of senseless cruelty, I find myself unable to find comfort in their energetic and highly social behavior. And for any readers who are inclined to call me hypocritical, I should point out that humans who fear dogs are almost always disinclined to harm them, compared to those infected with ophidiophobia, the irrational fear of snakes, who are almost always willing to butcher the objects of their fear. Regardless of both phobias being completely irrational, dogs are simply in less danger from humans who fear them than snakes are, period. But regarding cynophobia, perhaps canines are just not for me. However, to me, the idea of one using them to kill and eat humans is nothing short of intriguing. And this phenomenon has not only appeared in my own writing, but is highly prevalent throughout fiction and the real world. In accordance with the fictional character who has not only committed this action multiple times in his storyline, but is, himself, a victim of his own handiwork, I have, henceforth, decided to call this historical and literary phenomenon, "The Ramsay Bolton Treatment", as a dual reference to both him and "The Old Yeller Treatment", where a rabid dog is shot to death as a mercy killing. It's as though The Ramsay Bolton Treatment is a "reverse Old Yeller", where the dogs kill the humans that they had been previously subjected to.

-

The Ramsay Bolton Treatment is not just a term thrown around lightly, however. In fact, it has specific criteria for its labeling, to qualify its use.

1- the victim must die from the wounds inflicted.

2-the victim must be eaten while they are still alive.

3-the perpetrators must be more than two individuals at a time.

4-the perpetrators must have proportionally smaller mouths to tear pieces from their victim, rather than simply rip it in half, ie The Lost World-Jurassic Park in the Tyrannosaurus vs. trailers scene.

And now, some examples in fiction of The Ramsay Bolton Treatment in fiction, excluding my own creations. Just to give the reader an idea of its prevalence.

-Game of Thrones (2011-2019)-
Occurrences-3
Perpetrators-hunting hounds
Victims-Tansy, Walda Frey and her son, and Ramsay Bolton

-Hannibal (1999)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-pigs
Victims-Carlo and Mason Verger

-Criminal Minds (2005-2020)
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-dogs
Victims-"Jezebel"

-The Lost World-Jurassic Park (1997)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-compsognathus triassicus/longipes
Victims-Dieter

-The Lion King (1994)
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-hyenas
Victims-Scar

-Frozen (2010)-
Occurrences-2
Perpetrators-wolves
Victims-Dan and Joe

-Indiana Jones (1984 and 2008)-
Occurrences-between 5 and 7
Perpetrators-crocodiles and siafu ants
Victims-several Thuggee Cult members, Mola Ram, unnamed russian soldier, Colonel Dovchenko

-The Stranger (2020)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-coyotes
Victim-Carl E.

-Django Unchained (2012)
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-dogs
Victims-Dartanion

-The Lobster (2015)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-dogs
Victim-The Loner Leader

-The Hobbit-An Unexpected Journey (2012)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-wargs
Victim-orc lieutenant

-A Bug's Life (1998)-
Occurrences-1
Perpetrators-baby birds
Victim-Hopper

There are, of course, many other examples of this method of death being inflicted upon characters throughout fiction, from The Guardians of Ga'hoole, to Rick and Morty, and even The Suicide Squad (2021). Whatever the source of this prevalence, once you notice it, you will likely begin to see it everywhere.

---The Omnicide Saga---

--The Second Omnicide of the Apes--

--Part I

Reaper was incandescent with rage after Tamish's suicide and the accompanying destruction of the last of the world's smallpox. Compounding his rage was fear, as this situation also meant that The Coral Empire would need to contend with Patagonia, who was nearly ready to cross the Pacific Ocean and invade New Guinea. However, in her leader's fit of anxiety, Razor was busy coming up with an alternative strategy for the omnicide of the apes. But this was now secondary, as The Coral Empire was in dire need of preparation and a viable strategy.

The following day, the Patagonian fleet announced that it was ready to cross the ocean and bring down the genocidal kingdom, for good. Realizing that the Patagonians would arrive at Port Moresby in a matter of months, Reaper soon regathered himself and began to craft a strategy of defense, concurrent with a new idea for the omnicide, something that Razor had already outlined days earlier. She had concocted the concept of using anthrax to wipe out what remained of humanity. But Reaper argued that a bacteria could not sweep its way across the world. To amend this problem, Razor suggested that they pair the *anthracis* with a virulent strain of the common flu, and somehow get the bacteria to "piggyback" on the virus. To this, Reaper agreed, and began setting up a secret facility in the mountains, far from Port Moresby, to create this apocalyptic combination. The strategy was simple. With Lord Amir Khan also declaring war on The Coral Empire, Reaper knew that this would become a two-front war, where all sides would converge upon them. As in, get close enough to be within the range of any disbursement of a flu virus, something that they would not expect so far into the jungle, especially when they thought that the Draculists were without the principle weapon of the first omnicide at their disposal, given the destruction of the last of the smallpox. And so, with the final strategy finalized, verified, and backed by Reaper, the Draculists began their exodus into the Papuan Highlands, killing all of their prisoners on their way out.

-

The exodus consisted of 3 parts. The first priority was to transport as many materials and personnel to the highlands as possible before the Patagonians arrived. With so much to manage, Reaper elected to remain in Port Moresby to facilitate the exodus, while Razor and a small division of Dracula's Army and scientists were ordered to go to the chosen location there, build the facility, and concoct the bacteria-virus combination in time for the noose to close. Once the entire army was safely entrenched throughout the jungle, Reaper would then leave the

capital with the last of his soldiers, burning the city after it had been cleared as a scorched Earth tactic. This last portion was to be conducted through the famous Kadoka Track, used by the Austrailians during World War II. With everything in place, Razor soon bade farewell to her leader, and along with all that she would require, she left the capital city, not realizing that this would be the last time that she would ever again see Reaper.

As the armada approached, other groups were acting on their discontent. Enter the people of The Coral Empire, as when word of the exodus reached the ears of the general populace, they began to take matters into their own hands and rise up against the regime that had been accosting them for so long. From every corner of the empire, they all gathered what weapons they could and marched on the capital city, through swamp, jungle, and river. Meanwhile, The Lordship of the Ganges had gathered all of its forces, land and sea, and advanced south-eastward, toward The Indonesian Archipelago and on to the island of New Guinea, just as Patagonia was coming for Port Moresby from the west. All as these enemies converged on The Coral Empire, Reaper remained in the capital, directing his army to various roads and mountains, creating a ring around The Highland Facility, where Razor had just arrived with her group and immediately began the construction of her lab to create, what she'd been referring to as, "The Last Weapon".

After one week, The Highland Facility had been completed, a record time, surpassing Razor's anticipations. Then, with no time to lose, she and her scientists started to create The Last Weapon, just as the Patagonian armada was sighted from the shores of Port Moresby by Reaper, who quickly notified Razor of the situation. After the last of his army joined him, Reaper ordered them to The Kadoka Track. The rest of the units then prepared to engage the enemy in guerilla warfare, as was appropriate for such an environment as New Guinea, to buy as much time as possible for those at The Highland Facility and make the invaders pay for every single inch of territory that they took. And soon, the time had come. The Draculists had all fled the capital just in time for the Patagonians to make their landfall. On the other side of the island, The Gangetic Army landed on the Irian Jaya Peninsula and began to move inland in the direction of the fabled Star Mountain range. In the various cities of New Guinea, the common people quickly took over, liberating their corners of the empire from the Draculists' vice-like grip. All the while, their former occupiers were lacing the jungles and swamps with booby traps, not unlike the Viet-Cong of the Pre-Viral Age. Lastly, as Reaper took one last look at the city he'd given up, he sighed, and committed himself to what he knew was coming, as he and his army travelled up The Kadoka Track, just north of the capital city.

Port Moresby was captured with ease by the Patagonians, who were then informed of Reaper's retreat up The Kadoka Track, and soon followed him there.

-

The Demon's Shadow had fortified the trail, making sure to make its defences last as long as possible. Then, a lookout called to him, signalling the Patognian approach up the hill, and Reaper ordered their ambush to be sprung once their prey came within sight. Then, as if on cue, their targets became visible, and the Draculists opened fire.

-

The Patagonians were caught off-guard, due to the close proximity of the ambush to the city, thinking that their enemies would be hiding deeper in the jungle. They were temporarily beaten back by the surprise gunfire emanating from the misty cloak of the trees. In time however, they returned fire, cutting deep into the Draculist lines, forcing Reaper to spend more and more ammunition. After several hours in a deadlock, the Patagonians gained the upper hand and began to move in once a vast number of Draculists were killed. Reaper then ducked behind a large log, and held to his chest a belt of grenades, lacing his fingers through each of their pins, and drawing a deep breath.

Back in The Highland Facility, Razor received word of the Kadoka engagement and started to accelerate her timetable, commanding her personnel to search the surrounding area for more samples of anthrax bacteria. Meanwhile, she began to cultivate the flu virus within the bodies of captured villagers, taken from nearby settlements. As she was on the very cusp of creating the correct virus, but needed a larger amount of the bacteria before she could begin to achieve symbiosis of the 2 entities.

Back at Kadoka, the situation had turned in favor of the Patagonians, who had nearly wiped out the entire force. The power of the Draculists was more directed towards political and diplomatic leveraging, leaving them wholly unequipped to handle a real war. However, their dedication and resolve would see them be difficult for their enemies to dislodge, as Reaper demonstrated when the Patagonian army closed in on his position behind the log, and he wrapped his fingers into a fist, and readied himself for his final moments. The other Draculists there were also nearby, witnessing their leader preparing for the end, and decided that Dracula's last tenet should be honored, *Never leave the world without exacting a toll.* Remembering why they fought, the 5 or so remaining Draculists all met Reaper, and collectively grasped the belt of grenades, nodding to him in unison. Then, as the Patagonians came into view, Reaper quickly flexed his wrist, and let the pins fly.

-

The explosions ripped the Patagonians to pieces, killing a sizable number of their forces, nearly wiping out their Kadoka division. Yet, they were not all killed, and the remainder were forced to watch their friends disappear in clouds of blood and flame. This event also felled several dead trees in the area, blocking the road ahead, thereby forcing the Patagonians into the jungle that surrounded the trail. These troops quickly encountered the myriad of booby traps that were thronging the area, courtesy of Reaper, who had made it impossible not to tread over them. These devices soundly crippled the Kadoka division and the Patagonians were forced to rethink their strategy.

A few hours after Reaper's death, the last message he ever sent made it through to Razor before the explosion, informing her of her newly appointed position as Empress of the Coral Empire, and she knew exactly what that meant. Then, realizing what this also meant in relation to her enemies, Empress Razor announced that their final victory was at hand. Because in those few precious hours, she had finally managed to achieve a single symbiosis of her dual microbial scythes. To honor her fallen leader, Razor named this deadly combination, *bacillus anthracis-thanatos,* the last name referring to the psychopomp of Greek mythology, the Hadean Reaper who guided the condemned to where they truly belonged.

--Part II

While The Battle of the Kadoka Track had ended in a pyrrhic victory for the Draculists, in the west, The Lordship of the Ganges had been rapidly bogged down in the southern foothills of The Star Mountains, as these areas had also been laced with hidden jungle traps, as though Dracula's acolytes were acting as The Riverine Dragon's residual venom, poisoning every inch of the landscape.

In The Highland Facility, Empress Razor was busy accumulating enough *b. anthracis-thanatos* to infect all of the soldiers that came upon them. Though, to do this mechanically posed a logistical hurtle, one that would need to be fast and devious to overcome. In the meantime, the so-called viral-bacteria was being cultivated efficiently. But Razor dually placed her focus upon creating a device that could be activated like an explosive, but leave the real weapon within it undamaged. With anything incendiary out of the question, Razor got to thinking of an alternative method of causing an explosion. Then, it came to her, an idea of an explosive device that utilized not oxygen, but carbon dioxide to produce enough pressure at a fast enough rate to cause a violent explosion that would throw the bioweapon, housed in blood mixed with water, asunder. Then, one of the other scientists suggested that if enough compressed co2 could be remotely released from a large canister that was submerged in the deadly red water, then the resulting

rapid outward pressure change would produce the desired effect. Razor reacted well to this strategy, and ordered the other personnel to gather as many canisters of carbon dioxide as they could find, many of which were actually brought with them from Port Moresby during their departure. As Reaper thought it prudent to completely empty the previous labs in the city, so as to prevent their use by the enemy. Razor and the other scientists soon started to draw up schematics for this device, all while their enemies worked their way inland. However, those enemies were having great difficulty negotiating the dense, trap-laiden terrain, with ambushes around every tree, resulting in the ever-shrinking number of troops. Though not enough to defeat them, these lightning attacks were designed to whittle down the armies as much as possible, chipping away at morale while attempting to conserve as many of their own forces as possible. Nevertheless, the enemy kept advancing forwards on all sides, along with the rebellious population, who'd been given weapons by these armies to assist the war effort, something that they were more than happy to do. Slowly, the noose was beginning to constrict around the Draculists, however long it was taking.

It was months since the Patagonians had made their landfall, and many weeks since the Gangetic forces had invaded through West Papua. Their opposition had been steadily decreasing as they closed in to their headquarters, deep within the greenery-cloaked hills of the central highlands. Though, they were still many more miles away from the hive that they hoped to exterminate. All the while, they killed as many of the bees as possible. Within her palace, the queen was hyper-focused on her trump card, something that none of her enemies thought was a possibility, given the current state of the crumbling Coral Empire. However, if there was one thing Dracula's legacy had taught his successors, it was to never give up if the cause was worth the effort. And all of their enemies were met with stiff resistance at every single turn, further buying Razor time with every hour of success. At The Highland Facility, the empress was finally finalizing the device, codenamed "The Scythe" in honor of Reaper. It was a large plastic box filled with water that had been mixed with human blood. Submerged within this concoction was a large collection of highly pressurized co2 canisters, duct taped together to form a single cylinder. To quickly release that pressure, a mechanism similar to a grenade's pin was created that could be remotely triggered via a waterproof electronic wire that ran from the inside of the box to the outside, ending in a receiver that simply lay upon the jungle floor. The whole construction was then completely sealed with silicone, a substance that had also been contained within the wide variety of materials brought from Port Moresby. Finally, The Scythe was hoisted into a large tree, several feet off of the ground, and the remote was given to Razor. And with it, she promptly armed the bomb, hunkered down, and awaited the enemy's approach.

They were within sight in 4 days. The Patagonians had linked up with the Gangetic forces 2 days after Razor had finished her weapon, and were now eliminating the few Dracuilsts in their way, left and right. Then, after 2 more days of more of the same routine, they came upon the sight that they had anticipated for nearly an entire year, The Highland Facility, which turned out to

be nothing more than a small group of tents huddled in the thick undergrowth several miles west of Mount Hagen, deep in the island's interior. They then scanned the area, but didn't come into enemy contact. They moved in closer, approaching the campsite. Suddenly, a loud explosion was heard from above them, spilling a slew of red water that rained down upon them, soaking the entire division in the offal liquid. The signal was then given to engage, and the Draculists drew their weapons to attack. Oddly though, they drew no firearms, just knives and machetes. And in response, the coalition opened fire.

-

The slaughter was over in minutes, as the Draculists were all exterminated. Amongst their dead, was the last empress of The Coral Empire, shot to death by one of the enemy soldiers. But as if to spite her killers, her carcass bore not a look of pain, terror, or rage, but a smile. The coalition didn't know it yet, but that dead smile was Razor's signal to humanity that she, Reaper, and Dracula, had already won. But to the coalition, they were the victors, and the twisted death cult of Dracula's latter philosophy was forever eliminated.

--Part III

With the extermination of the Draculists complete, and the local people's willingness to hold their own elections, the coalition, and all of their soldiers, went home after a mere 2 day occupation to root out any surviving Draculists. But on their way back to their respective ships, several of them began to cough. Though, due to the tropical environment, they simply disregarded it as a bug that would soon take care of itself. They carried on with their lives, not realizing that they were to be the final death knell for their entire species.

-

It began slowly at first, with each of the armies arriving at their kingdoms of origin. Then, with all of the unawareness in the world, they returned to their families, their governments, and their towns, cities, and villages. These soldiers were also rewarded for their victory by their respective leaders, who invited them to banquets, parties, and large gatherings with others from far away places. Serving dignitaries hailing from The Enterprise of the Black Sea, newly led by Lord Tamish's son, Hailin Jalin, to the freshly elected Emperor of the Coral Empire, Emperor Madrage Kuline, hailing from Lae. These celebrations even included many from the world's nomadic tribes, who, upon hearing of the end of the Draculists, wished to further integrate themselves with the remaining kingdoms. And so, they also attended the gatherings. All in all, the celebrations continued worldwide, and were further escalated when America announced the end of their civil war. They had even elected a new ruler, Emperor George Makenzie, a relative of the mad Emperor Carl I, killed by Dagger not 2 years before. However, under it all, a monster was rising, the final product of the final act of the final Draculists.

The coughing dragged on for multiple weeks. Then, the sores started to appear and turn black. Then, without warning, the person would cease their exhalation all together. And slowly, they would ultimately die. The finality of this process took no more than 2 days to manifest, and by then, it was too late to save them. This was first seen in the soldiers that had returned from the war, over a month prior. And soon, these symptoms were seen in their children, then their spouses, then anyone that they had interacted with in that fleeting month of grace. This same pattern was repeated across the entire world, the vibrant celebrations working in favor of The Final Weapon.

-

Weeks later, the last 5 empires were nearly depopulated, the survivors escaping to the surrounding nomadic settlements. But to these, they carried their afflictions, wiping the settlements out within days of their arrival. Then, those survivors left for other settlements, only to kill all those living there. On and on this went for only 8 short months, the living dooming those that they sought to be their salvation.

-

Only 8 months after humanity had won, humanity had lost. Lost their society, their rule, and eventually, their entire species. And this time, it was gone for good. Their genocidal kingdom had been fully and completely annihilated.

---The Edge of the Sky---

It was meant as a blessing, the dyson ring. A beacon for humanity. But its constructors were all dead. Having given in to the wendigo that plagued the structure and consumed them all. All, with the exception of one, a lone survivor of an astronomical slaughter that left the great ring barren. The only other living things aboard were the countless rats, and their sole predator. A single winding serpent, a companion whose caretaker had gone mad with The Hunger, the mantle that was given to that which suddenly afflicted every human on that desolate star. He had eaten his wife while she slept beside him. The snake then escaped the enclosure and slithered into the slight blade of light, drawn by the bedroom door, held ajar when its occupant had rushed outside and feasted upon the hapless starving multitudes beyond the dark, bloody room. The entirety of the ring's population had descended into a craving, drooling, and dying madness, a cacophony of zombified husks who could only find solace in the juicy, tearing flesh of the others aboard the structure. In the end, there was just one man left standing, tortured, starving, emaciated, and spending his latter days in a haze, relegated to preying upon the rats that scurried about the empty corridors. But the snake was happy, gleefully eating the little mammals whenever he found the need and sleeping in whatever rooms that he wished, for there was never again a need to fear the hatred of those within them.

---The Hammer of Saurians---

Birds were no substitute. Not for their ancestors. Such was the thought of Marcus, who had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and an unrelenting passion for the lives of the past. The astrophysicist retained a large collection of various bird species in an ultimately futile effort to replicate their awe-inspiring forefathers. And every day, he would lay in his bed and curse the merciless rock that saw their end, embedding itself near the small Mexican town of Chicxulub, the name of the area that had been given to that unfeeling lithic monstrosity. In his eyes, it was a cosmic mistake, something that should never have happened, something that could have been prevented. As in its fiery wake, had perished his beloved Surians.

-

Marcus was a Phd student at Oxford in the UK, focusing heavily on all of the sciences that he would require to implement his grand dream to see the dinosaurs once again. Not with genetic engineering would this vision be realized however, but by piercing the walls of space and time. Then, once this had been accomplished, a mechanism with the purpose of redirecting the fatal asteroid would be needed to secure the longevity of his long-extinct feathered friends. Though, not wanting any sort of opposition to this goal, he refused to divulge any of this to any who were

near him, or to any who inquired. He simply remained silent and busy, constructing his masterpiece.

In 5 years, the apparatus had been completed. The device looked like a small plane, whose nose sported a claw-like mechanism that created a transparent shield, powered by an ion drive and projected into a circular pattern via heavily magnetized material that crowned each point on the phalangeal extensions. This claw would be used to create a force-field to deflect the asteroid, knocking it off-course and sending it hurtling away from Earth. The delivery method for this vehicle to the era of Chicxulub, was a time-bending mechanism that was created with high amounts of force, radiation, and heated material, similar to a miniature super-collider. Both of these devices were attached to the same fixed vehicle, a heavily modified Cessna-153 aircraft. It was both a clock and a shield, an antidote for the hammer of the saurians. And so, with his tool secured, Marcus boarded his craft and set the on-board timer for 66 million BCE. Then, with a deep breath, he turned the key and pulled the lever on the ceiling. All at once, the world around him melted away, leaving himself and the device intact. And before he could truly process what had happened, the buildings were replaced with a dense forest, and the walls of time travel fell away, throwing the device into a hot, dense world. A world devoid of man, and ruled by dinosaurs.

Marcus leaped out of the vehicle in awe. He had done it. He had broken time itself. And now he could finally save his beloved Surians. But for now, he simply wanted to see one. And in a few moments, his eyes were met with great feathered colossus, a species that science had not yet seen. For its skeleton had remained undiscovered in the other world. And yet, here it was, alive and beautiful. It was as if the new world had ceased to exist around Marcus, and all that remained was this living tower, covered in bright feathers that even the great Quetzacoatl would envy. So transfixed was Marcus, that he momentarily forgot his mission to save the dinosaurs. But soon, he came to his bewildered senses, boarded the time machine, and activated the other side of its programming, the shield, and took it to the daylight sky in search of his nemesis, the dinosaur annihilating rock named Chicxulub. To start, Marcus decided to set himself up at the place where his foe was meant to rest, and flew his craft to Chicxulub’s future tomb.

Marcus’ vehicle was outfitted with an independent oxygen supply for upper-atmospheric conditions, but nothing suited for the vacuum of space. Therefore, to deflect the asteroid, he would need to intercept it as it came down from the highest level of the atmosphere, just before Earth’s gravity became too strong to resist.

-

Marcus landed the plane near the only terrestrial habitat nearby, the southern tip of Laramidia, North America. And when he did, he not only sighted a large herd of Alamosaurus, but also extended a specially designed telescope, brought from his own time, to be mounted on the cab door of the aircraft. For days, he stared through its lens, scanning the sky for his quarry.

The Hammer of Saurians was surprisingly beautiful when it finally became visible through his telescope. It was about 8:22 pm. Collapsing his spyglass, Marcus then took off from his 15 day-long landing site, and activated the shield, which glowed to life before him. He then thrust his craft upward, knowing that it would be now or never, as the asteroid drew nearer.

-

The plane came into contact with Chicxulub within 20 minutes, just enough time to hit the rock before it entered the lower atmosphere. The reverse impact caused the shield to be destroyed, and the plane's engine to become damaged. The rest of the craft bent to the unrelenting will of gravity, spiralling downward to the vast ocean below. Meanwhile, the apocalyptic asteroid was successfully knocked off-course, whizzing like a bullet, barely scraping the sky before disappearing altogether. Marcus had won his battle with Chixulub, and saved his beloved Saurians. But at a steep price, as his craft fell to the ever-green Earth and crashed violently into the gulf of Mexico, not unlike the catastrophic stone that he'd only just banished from the planet. He landed on a small island, close to the main shoreline, and emerged from the wreckage, whose atomic time travel engine had died, and whose flight capabilities had been completely destroyed, leaving Marcus stranded in a world he had saved.

---The Other Traveller---

Marcus lay upon the beach, having swum from the little island where his craft had been left to rot, having accomplished its mission. Marcus, however, was not able to get back home, his time machine ruined in all totality. But this did not sadden him, for he knew that there was no home to go back to now. He had irrevocably altered the future, making it so that the dinosaurs survived into the Holocene Epoch. However, not factored into his preparations was the vast evolutionary consequences of his actions. With a world still dominated by dinosaurs, the mammal lineage was never afforded the opportunity to take it, preventing their diversification in the scars of catastrophe, and preventing his own species' existence. But not in his thoughts was this turn of events, as he lay bleeding to death from a large shard of shrapnel that was dislodged from his craft. He smiled, for he had saved the world. At least, the world that he wanted.

-

An hour later, his body lay cold, having finally died on that beach. Soon, the rains arrived, and gently buried his body in silt before he could be reached by any nearby scavengers. And there he lay, for 66 million years.

The dinosaurs further continued their uncontested reign over the world. And far into the time of Marcus, they had diversified ever-further, thanks to their savior that they would never know. A savior that was still buried, along with his time machine.

-

One night though, another new star appeared in the sky. A small one, whose brightness exceeded all others.

He was a solo voyager. A traveller from another world, far beyond the Earth. He was on a self-imposed mission to find other life-bearing planets. Not for colonization, but simply for study, as his species was unreliant on vast amounts of resources plundered from existing worlds. As a consequence, this Other Traveller from another world sought not to interfere with the life thronging this rock.

-

As he landed his ship, he noticed on his scanner the immense collection of fossilized skeletons beneath the surface of the alien planet, and part of his routine was to collect one sample of every extinct being present in each place that he visited, to catalog a dictionary of the universe's life. Emerging from his vessel, his appearance was that of a hovering wormlike entity, with a great eye at the thinking end of his 2 ft or so legless body. He did, however, possess the ability of telekinesis, courtesy of his mechanical implants that granted him this unique leverage over matter. Gradually, over the course of many months, The Traveller successfully catalogued millions of unique species, all within their consistent layers of stone. All, that is, with the exception of one. A lone fossilized animal, unlike any that he'd seen before. It was tall, lanky, and possessed a massive skull for its body's modest size. The thing perplexed him. How could this creature have evolved when none of the other extinct life in the same layer matched his evolutionary pathway? Then, as The Traveller was searching the surrounding area for answers, he came upon a second anomaly, a preserved remnant of a metallic vehicle, very different from his own, but unmistakably created by the hands of another crafty creature, such as himself. Even more interestingly, it was located within the same exact rock layer as the odd skeleton. Cataloging both, along with all of the other skeletons he'd located by scanning the Earth's crust with his ship, the mono-irised visitor hovered back to it, and took off into the stars, ready to show his own planet these most bizarre findings.

---The Species That Never Was---

The Traveller came not from a rocky world, but a metal one, as his species wished not to disrupt the life thriving on their original planet, and instead constructed a massive space station, using a nearby asteroid belt that was rich in iridium. As such, the structure was nearly entirely made of the foreign substance, as were the various smaller ships that darted in and out of the colossal station, a structure that housed the entirety of their species.

-

The Iridium Colossus was soon approached by The Traveller, who spoke to the operators about the oddities that he had found on Earth. They enthusiastically permitted him to enter, as nothing pleased their species more than knowledge. So much so, that the majority of their homeworld contained museums and libraries, and they were always eager to add to their mammoth collections.

A full analysis was conducted on the many specimens that were scanned by The Traveller. The end result of which revealed that the odd vehicle and the skeleton were not originally a part of that ecosystem. Though, where they had come from, none could say for certain. But what was certain was the purpose of the fossilized machine, which had its time-travelling mechanisms miraculously preserved, having remained undisturbed ever since its fateful crash onto that island 66 million years before it was found. Holographic reconstructions corroborated this assessment. As for the skeleton, given the complete lack of context, they could not make heads or tails of it. However, they did manage to age the bone to the exact same time period that they themselves lived in. This completely confounded the researchers, as there was no other evidence that a civilization capable of engineering this kind of technology had ever existed on that planet, despite the specimens undoubtedly originating there. It was a scientific anomaly. It was at this time that one junior researcher made a comment regarding the time travelling mechanism of the vehicle and the possibility that it was indeed from a civilization originating on Earth. Yet somehow, this creature had altered events in such a way as to prevent its existence, though she could not hazard a guess as to why it would do such a thing. Nevertheless, the researchers were satisfied enough with this data for the time being, and physically replicated a 3 dimensional model of both specimens to be displayed in one of their museums.

The exhibit opened to the public a year later, drawing in floating crowds of hundreds who were eager to view the strange pair. The display was remarkably simple, the skeleton posed in front of the vehicle. Behind these was painted a forested background, referencing the location in which they were found. Above the diorama was emblazoned the only conclusion that the

researchers could truly draw from the being and its machine, and they were forever remembered, collectively, as *The Species That Never Was.*

---The Omnicide Saga---

--The Immortal Hydra--

“Ideas are bulletproof”

-V for Vendetta

The world was now empty, picked clean in less than a year. All because of one man’s ideas about how the planet’s life should look. As the years ticked by, and the planet grew greener, there were no more humans left alive to wonder why it had all happened. How could one man trigger armageddon, without even being alive?

-

In the end, two ideologies became fulfilled. Out of every single set of prophecies and destinies imagined by humanity throughout their short, violent reign, from The Rapture, to Ragnarok, to those imagined by cults the world over, the only ones to come to pass were the ones which opposed humanity, either as it was, or in its entirety. How could it be?

-

The answer is immortality.

-

Dracula was, of course, only human, born just as any other. He laughed, he cried, and finally, he died. But as his words became corporeal, those around him began to see them as the truth, a truth that they could adhere to. And one by one, the proverbial serpent became a hydra. As soon as one head died, two more were born from the stump of the one who was severed. And there were no Heracles’ to slay this creature, such was the arrogance of humans afflicted with humanity. As in their vanity, and subsequent ignorance, they discarded any ideas that conformed not to the whims and benefits of their species. In fact, this aloofness to that which opposed them ultimately sowed the seeds of their destruction. And those seeds were reaped after the death of their planter, thanks to the permanence of his ideas, stitched into the mind of Reaper, setting him up as the torch-bearer to bring the apes down, once and for all. A promise that he kept, even in a death of his own. And so, the hydra regenerated after this head was cut from its body, and the serpents that grew were the last ones needed to finalize their predecessors’ vision. And that vision ultimately became a reality, due to the willingness of the corporeal beings who sired it to bring it to life. These were Dracula, Reaper, and finally Razor,

not to mention the countless other heads of the hydra that had made the dream come true, simply because the idea existed. The idea of a better world.

-

Though the schism split the few who'd survived the initial cull, Dracula refused to die, simply regrowing into 2 different beings, both untouchable, and immortal. Renewalism had become a reality, and after that, Dracula's ghost completed its mission, and made its counterpart, Draculism, into the final guillotine to execute the apes, forever.

-

In the end, Dracula had created a legacy. And in this way, he had become immortal. The serpentine hydra that could never truly die.

THE BOOK OF YIG

---The Choir of the Dunes---

Ibrahim had heard legends of voices in the sand, the tiny grains whispering a message that had remained unheard. Curiosity led him into the driving dunes that seemed to echo his name as he wandered into their shadow. His ears then became overwhelmed with the ring of some droning, distant chime, an echo that brought with it a massive gust of wind that roiled the granulous Earth into the air. Ibrahim would have considered running, but he remained transfixed by the awe of the desert's unnatural scream. As the winds accelerated, they revealed a white lake of bleached bones beneath his feet, though he took no notice of them, as he remained hypnotized by the choir of the dunes. So pronounced was his absence of mind, that he neither felt, nor saw, nor heard the flaps of clothing being torn from his body, nor the skin, muscles, or tendons beneath them. For he believed that he had found the voice Allah in those dunes, a voice that called him to stay for eternity.

-

The meat swaddling his bones had gone entirely within moments, and before long, his own skeleton fell piecemeal into the vast bed of others. But his whisper could still be heard, ever so slightly, within a single bead of the sand that had spoken to him. His voice had been made just another in the vast throngs that were trapped within the shattered Earthen glass that had stolen them from once living people, those whose chalk white remains were reburied as the wind died around them. Just beneath the vast blanket of unending golden dunes they were hidden, until another victim was added to the grave of others who believed that they found god.

---The Worm---

I lay upon the wooden floor, unwounded. Yet, I feel as though my leg is being consumed from below by the massive tube-like esophagus of a great carnivorous annelid, despite nothing physically ailing me. I suppose the mind is as powerfully imaginative as they say, able to conjure a great worm to feed upon your leg without leaving so much as a scratch.

---Of Flayed Leather---

He'd always doubted himself, doubted that he was anything other than typical. For years this label had been etched into his being by others, peers who saw not the potential beneath his skin.

But it was this label-carved skin that Zachary Bolton of Albuquerque, New Mexico had assimilated into for the majority of his 22 years of life in a shell that he'd never once entertained the prospect of crawling out of, for what would his peers think of him should he become someone else, someone that stroked not their collective ego? But it is often following failure that one finds the courage to escape their prison of flesh and craft for themselves another. But sometimes, that second skin is nothing more than a fabrication, a cheap imitation of someone else, someone to whom they've attached worth and meaning, someone that they wanted to be, someone that they believe is a better person than they are, or had been. And for Zachary, that person had lived her life impressing others with her intellect, creativity, and dedication to other people, a being that cast her brother in shadow. But it was in her shadow that he remained concealed, waiting for the moment where her life could become his, *a life of significance, a life of his own acquisition*, he thought to himself, for within her skin, he could, at last, be great, good, worthy. His sister served her community and her species well at every turn, and after all, to be made to be worthy, in his mind, was to be made to serve. And he did serve, for it was to his teacher and his teachings that he bent the knee, willing to do anything to become, finally, truly, everlastingly worthy of anyone, or anything.

Peeling away his sister's skin was not difficult for him, for he'd been preparing to accomplish his ultimate goal for 5 long years of tutelage under his dark master, the Navajo witch Ata Akagi or "Feather Skin", so-named for his habit decorating his flesh by embedding into it countless black feathers from the butchered remains of crows. The blood that streamed from these punctures pooled upon the floor of his cave, creating an omnipresent odor of iron and death. Feather Skin had instructed his pupil in the arts of his tribe's taboo medicine, warping the otherwise innocent practice into something far more perverse. When questioned of his innovative barbarity, he would always remind his pupil that not everything had to be used for its intended purpose, and carried on instructing him in the ways of what he called "Black Medicine".

-

The pupil of Feather Skin had called himself Zachary Bolton before his adoption of Ligaii Ichahii or "White Moth'' as his moniker. At which point, he was inducted into Feather Skin's tutelage. Over the next half-decade, White Moth became profoundly adept in the practice of Black Medicine, and had resolved to become the most diabolical entity in Navajo lore, something that even Feather Skin thought to be a mistake, as he had never before encountered a white man quite like this.

Prior to his introduction to the darkest of native practices, before he was called White Moth, Zachary Bolton was a student at The University of New Mexico, studying to become a quantum physicist. However, upon failing the placement exams required to participate, Zachary became despondent, and went on an impromptu trip to the territory of The Navajo, to find meaning and

purpose in something, anything. When he arrived, he was directed to a local inn where he overheard a rumor about a dark medicine man living out in the mesa, far to the northwest, and of how the locals were considering taking matters into their own hands, as the police had little jurisdiction in their nation. Zachary was intrigued by this story and decided to make his way out to the mesa and meet this apparent “dark medicine man” for himself.

-

He did.

-

Upon seeing a potential within Zachary, Feather Skin offered for him to become a student of his trade, as he was growing older, even his vast knowledge could not forestall his death. But Zachary initially refused, until Feather Skin revealed the names of the Bolton family members, who were back in Albuquerque. Caught off-guard, Zachary asked him how he could have such knowledge, to which Feather Skin offered to teach him this precise skill.

---

5 years on, and Zachary had fully embraced Black Medicine, becoming White Moth, in totality. And after pressing him for more information about the monster that he wished to become, Feather Skin acquiesced, and taught him the rites, despite his personal reservations, as he knew that White Moth would need access to this forbidden knowledge at some point if he were to become the vessel of his legacy. And so, Feather Skin provided White Moth with the spell to be used and sent him on a quest to become a yee naaldlooshii or “skinwalker”.

The ritual was simple enough, a fact which surprised White Moth, as he imagined that such magic would be far more complex to execute than it turned out to be. He was given a knife and one of his mentor’s black feathers, but was told that to truly become a skinwalker, he must kill someone close to him, be it a friend or family member, plant the feather into their eye, and recite the spell that he had been given. Then, he would need to cut the skin from any animal he chose to become, but needed to do so within 24 hours of performing the ritual. Finally, he was to wear the flayed skin of the chosen prey, and recite the spell once again. After this was completed, he would take on the form whatever he’d chosen to be.

-

He had chosen his own sister.

After cutting her throat, White Moth performed the rite and felt a sudden rush of energy coursing through his body, like a venomous but electrifying sting. He then chose his animal, and peeled off his sister’s skin.

--

After degloving her entire body, he fashioned her flesh into a pale cloak, wrapped himself in it, and repeated the spell. His vision briefly reddened, then returned to normal. And in the mirror to his left, he saw not his own face, but the visage of his sister. Suddenly, White Moth then spied his mother’s shadow in the open door frame and saw it disappear into the hallway. Not wishing for his secret to be divulged, he pursued his mother to her bedroom, but she had already locked the door and was undoubtedly contacting the police. Caught in a bind, White Moth attempted to kick the door down, only to realize that he no longer possessed his own strength, as he had assumed his sister’s form, and thus inherited her weaker muscle. As a result, he was forced to shed her skin in order to kick the door down, just before he heard the sound of sirens in the distance. Thinking on his feet, White Moth decided to perform the ritual again on his own mother to deceive the police, who were already banging on the front door as they announced their presence. White Moth cut his mother’s throat just a few moments later, and as with his sister, took his mother’s form. When the police burst into the house, White Moth confronted them as his mother and told them that her daughter had called simply to play a practical joke and had imitated her voice to do so, adding that she had been confined to her room as punishment. Annoyed, but deceived, they took her statement and left the house, not even bothering to check the daughter’s room, as White Moth had closed it seconds before it would have been in their line of sight.

-

Taking a deep breath as the police cars disappeared from view, White Moth realized that to retain his shapeshifting abilities, he would need to prevent the authorities from connecting the dots and deducing who he was. For this to happen, he could not afford to remain in a single human form for longer than a day or so and would need to commence the ritual on multiple successive victims to evade detection. To gain their trust, he would be limited to targets within the social circles of his previous kills. As privacy was required to perform his rite, White Moth needed to become who they loved in order to gain access to them and their exclusive sanctuaries. With this in mind, White Moth referred to a list of his mother’s friends and contacts, and found a suitable target in the mire of the local homeowners' association, of which she had been a member. White Moth then phoned the HOA president, Carol Anderson, and invited her to breakfast the next day. She enthusiastically agreed, and White Moth had successfully lined up his next target. With her connections, Carol’s shape would provide countless successive options for transformation.

--

White Moth flayed Carol and donned her skin after she arrived.

In the guise of his latest victim, White Moth soon called a meeting of the HOA. During this congregation of prey, he pinpointed the most sociable of the other members and asked to be invited to her house for dinner. This member, Agatha, accepted White Moth's proposal, and several hours later, he'd clothed himself with her flesh.

As the murders increased, the abandoned hollow skins of White Moth's kills began to pile up behind him. Though he'd taken care to dispose of these remains, the absence of their previous owners became known to those who loved them most. However, as physical proof of the perpetrator was not accessible to them, this ever-lengthening list of mourners could do nothing of a legal variety, and so collectively decided to pull on this thread of death themselves.

--

After White Moth had abandoned Carol's House, he'd never returned to his mother's, and so had inadvertently left it open to investigation. But not by the police, as no one had reported her or her daughter missing, and not enough time had passed for the police to begin a formal search. So the locals were forced to illegally enter the house on their own, to a completely empty dwelling. However, upon searching the rooms, one of them discovered a black feather tucked underneath the mattress of the mother's bed. Intrigued by this find and understanding that this alone would not be enough to get the police involved, they decided to take it to ABQ BioPark Zoo to have it identified instead.

The man they met with was an ornithologist, who informed them that their feather belonged to a corvid, most likely a crow. However, he also added that this feather did not molt naturally, as tiny bits of the bird's flesh and viscera remained adhered to the stem, indicating that the feather had been forcibly ripped from the bird's body. A member of the group, named Henry, asked who would do something like that, to which the ornithologist responded with a rumor that he had come across while studying the decline of crow populations in the Navajo mesa to the south. He had wished to officially investigate these declines, but was expelled from the land when the locals caught wind of his curiosity. He then warned Henry and his search party that if they chose to follow through with their own inquiry, they must do so discreetly, revealing that he too wanted answers.

-

Satisfied with this lead, the party rented a bus and travelled into Navajo lands, not sure what to look for, or who to ask.

The first people that they interviewed about the black feather were tight-lipped. However, as they began offering bribes of money, and the occasional bottle of liquor, they eventually pierced the veil of the taboo, and through the vague mumblings of those who were convinced to whisper, the party managed to piece together that if the feather was removed from the body of a crow, then there was only one man who dared kill such an animal, a deadly shaman who practiced the taboo art of Black Medicine, located deep in the rocky crags of the mesa, further north, revealing that the signal of crows circling a column of smoke would give away his campsite. However, despite knowing how to find the shaman, the locals, even inebriated, would dare not go near his hovel, as it was believed they would be cursed, should they ever cross that boundary.

-

Nonetheless, with their knowledge obtained, the party set off, ignoring the warnings of the natives.

Following the dark avian circles, the party eventually came upon the mesa, wherein they finally found the cave of Feather Skin.

--

He was sitting in a puddle of his own blood with his signature black feathers littering his body when they came to him. Surprised at so many visitors to his stony hovel, he hoarsely inquired as to their intentions, already knowing their identities, though he revealed this latter fact not. Henry then handed the black feather to him, and demanded to know if he had been the one to pluck it from its owner. Feather Skin quivered his lip slightly and spoke, claiming that he knew not where they'd acquired such an artifact, but that they must not be seen to possess it in the local villages and towns, for it may prompt disdain and revulsion from the "weak-minded". Henry grew impatient, and said that several of their community members had gone missing, and that the only clue available was this feather, then explained that it had been taken from a crow, and that the only person who would do this was him. Feather Skin cracked his neck to one side, letting several identical feathers fall from his head. Then, picking one up, he handed it to Henry, revealing the identity of White Moth, the man to whom he'd given the feather in question. Henry pressed him further, to which Feather Skin warned the party not to engage White Moth, as he was now the most vile creature in Navajo myth, a myth no longer. Henry asked him what that meant, and was met with the term yee naaldlooshii, the Navajo name for skinwalker. A chill ran down Henry's spine as this word left Feather Skin's lips. The former then asked if skinwalkers could take the form of another human, revealing some prior knowledge of the entity. Feather Skin was surprised at this revelation, not realizing the true depravity of his apprentice until then. He calmly informed the party that White Moth was his former protege, a young white man,

formerly named Zachary Bolton, who had come to him not 6 years earlier and learned the arts of Black Medicine. Henry promptly left the cave with his other compatriots as the name of the killer was revealed, and convinced the rest to return to the city at once, so that White Moth would not have time enough to escape. But one particularly perturbed member of the team, angered at Feather Skin's audacity and apparent lack of remorse for his crucial role in creating a monster, took it upon herself to grab a shovel from the back of the van and cave his head in with its blade-like edge. From above, the party then heard the dozens of crows leave the pillar of smoke that they had previously been circling in an instant, taking off in all directions as soon as Feather Skin ceased to breathe. No one had attempted to stop her from killing him, and no one said a word of protest as they all sat in the van. The guilty shovel was tossed aside into the dirt and the van sped off towards Albuquerque.

Stopping at the first home to witness the dark ritual, the party searched the property endlessly in an attempt to locate the hidden skins of White Moth's mother and sister, and found absolutely nothing. Henry then scolded Feather Skin's killer, telling her that had he lived, he could have told them how to find the remains of a skinwalker's previous transformations. She shook her head, admitting that she acted hastily, but claimed that it did them no good to dwell on something that could no longer solve their problem. Surrendering, Henry then proceeded to tear up the carpet in White Moth's old room, only to see a wooden floor. He did the same in the other rooms, finding no trace of what had transpired. Then, one of the other party members called Henry from the kitchen, saying that he thought he had found something. When approached, the caller showed them the mother's discarded cell phone. Apparently, White Moth cared not who found it. Searching its contents, they were able to gather a list of potential targets, collectively deducing White Moth's methodology. Henry eyed the names of the HOA members that the mother had listed in her contacts, and connected the name of the president to one Carol Anderson. Thinking that White Moth would have chosen her as his next host, reasoning that she would provide the most ample opportunities for access to a large pool of victims, Henry told the rest of the party to follow him to Carol's house, down the road, and trace her whereabouts from there. The party agreed and set out to uncover White Moth's newest stolen identity.

Following the trail of people who had spoken with Carol, then Agatha, then others, they finally reached the house of the 10th person they had looked up. The last person they had spoken to said that it had been only 30 minutes since they had been in contact with their friend, who had gone home after saying that they felt ill. Zeroing in, the party knocked on the door of the house and came face to face with the friend of the one they'd spoken with. She was another older woman who introduced herself as Crystal and invited the entire party in for a meal. Before they entered however, Henry inquired about skinwalkers and let loose the name Feather Skin, to a visibly irritated Crystal, who very quickly slammed the door shut. Convinced that Crystal was White Moth in disguise, Henry kicked his way into the house and was followed in by the others, only to find the place empty. At that moment, a thud emanated from above, unveiling Crystal's

location on the upper floor. Henry then bolted up the stairs with the party and finally saw Crystal disappear into her room, holding her little bichon frise dog, and slam the door shut. Henry then rushed to the door, and kicked it down just as easily as he had the front. As the wooden panel met the floor, Crystal's dog bolted out of the room and ran out of the open front door. Henry then crept into the room and spied Crystal sitting on the bed in the dark. Wasting no time, he leaped and tackled her to the ground, only to find himself tangled up in her empty skin that had been draped over a bulbless lamp. Suddenly, police sirens came from outside, as their previous contact had witnessed them break down her friend's door, and had called the authorities.

Henry and the others were all booked and processed, and were charged with breaking and entering, assault, desecration of a corpse, and possible murder, as the flayed skin of Crystal Weaver had been recovered and tested, with the only foreign DNA present being from Henry and the dog, the latter of which had not been found, but concerned the officers not.

--

Later that night, they were jailed, pending a trial in the coming months.

Meanwhile, in downtown Albuquerque, Crystal's bichon had been found and taken to a local no-kill animal shelter. However, with his collar nowhere to be found, the workers had no way of contacting the owner, and so placed him in the cages with the others.

--

4 weeks later, he was formally adopted by a wealthy family that lived outside the city. The white dog lived the rest of his life in unparalleled comfort, assimilating well into the final skin that he had chosen to wear.

---Made to Be Worthy---

Desperation is often the source of self-destruction.

--Part I

The message swept across the internet.

Trouble in love?

Ash's Dating Seminar is the place to go!

Free of charge!

All are welcome!

7:00 pm-1:00 am

224 West Ave.
Los Angeles, California
90039

As suspicious as it seemed, the desperate crawling dog-like imps in The City of Angels were biting into the leash, clawing at the gate, and drooling from the jaws to have just one shot at creating love where it did not exist. One of these cast-offs was a young man named Jimmy Halstead. At almost 28 years of age, he had never been in a relationship with another of his kind, dipsite desiring one. It seemed as though he drew the eye of no one, not once being able to converse with a woman for more than a few fleeting moments before an alternative prospect ensnared her attention, snatching her away from him at every single turn. Desperation had turned his heap of inadequacies inward, blaming himself for failing to be worthy of anyone's affection. Worth that this new internet advertisement had offered to instill. With little else in the way of a method, he recorded the address and made his way to the location.

Upon arriving, Jimmy noticed that the facility was an abandoned church, scheduled for demolition. Yet never was this order followed through on, leaving the structure to rot in the California sun. As Jimmy approached the building, he noticed a large number of other vehicles parked about the grounds. It seemed as though he was far from the only one seeking help for his inability to be loved.

-

Inside, there was a large throng of other attendees, mostly male, though there were 1 or 2 female clients as well. All were intermingling with one another, even going so far as for some of the male individuals to take their shot with the females. And of course, they failed. Suddenly, a loud thud came from the decrepit altar. At the podium stood a tall man, head shaved to the scalp, he wore a red dress shirt and a black suit jacket and dark blue jeans. His face bore a deep scar that tore across his eyes, signalling that he was blind. He held a white cane in his hands and spoke softly, but harshly, with every word hitting the air as if he'd thrown a stone into the dirt beneath his feet. He welcomed his congregation of, whom he referred to as his students, and introduced himself as Ash, just Ash, without giving them a surname. He proceeded to make clicking sounds with his mouth, which led Jimmy to assume that Ash had learned how to echolocate, almost like a bat. Ash clicked his way around the room and announced that there were 25 of them in the building, a number that was indeed precise, and continued to speak, claiming that most of them would never find what they were looking for. He then called for his assistant, a woman whom he called Katheryn, who appeared from an adjacent room. She held a large white bucket in her hands, but did not reveal its contents. Ash then began to lecture, telling his students that they were all here because none of them were worthy of love, respect, or affection from others. Which is why they had sought him out, to make them worthy.

-

Ash then motioned for Katheryn to empty the bucket onto the floor, pouring the contents in a semi-circle around the students. It turned out to be broken glass. As this was done, Ash began to speak again, telling the congregation that pride and entitlement had been their enemy, and that they all needed to learn penance. He then ordered them to kneel on the glass before them. Ash said that his students must learn that to be rejected is to be humbled by a being that saw itself as a god. And so, they needed to become tempered to the pain of others' contempt, and learn to humble themselves before "the gods" that they wished to please.

-

Jimmy was unsure about this lesson, however he could not imagine a better alternative than to listen to the guru that he'd come to learn from. After all, his ignorance as to how else to please another person was precisely the reason for his attendance. And so, he obeyed Ash's command and kneeled upon the glass. The pain was excruciating, and his knees began to bleed into the opaque shards. Jimmy shed a tear, but he'd not caught the attention of Ash, who was busy on the other end of the crystalline crescent.

--

Ash clicked into the young man's face, getting an idea of its rotund outline. His name was Charlie, and he'd been reluctant to kneel. Ash asked him how many times he had been rejected by a woman, to which Charlie responded by saying around 15 or so. Ash shook his head in shame, then proceeded to tell his student that the emotional pain of this rejection could only be tempered by the physical pain of the glass. It would make him stronger, he said, and women love the strong. Begrudgingly persuaded, Charlie knelt, and shed a tear as well.

--Part II

Jimmy could barely walk after the 3 hours were up. Ash dismissed the day's class after his final lecture, in which he declared that all of his students had become numb to the pain of rejection via The Lightning Rod of Glass. They were then all directed to get their wounds treated, but were told not to inform any healthcare professionals of their source, so as to preserve the potential to learn more, as Ash had revealed that there would be 2 other lessons in the following days, concluded by a final "test" at the end of the seminar. Desperation forced every student to comply.

-

At every hospital visit though, the nurses and doctors treating these repetitive injuries noticed the pattern. But at every inquiry, the students were silent. And with no evidence of foul play, the caregivers were forced to concede and patch up the wounds, but were careful to take note of their bearers' identities as they left the hospital with bandaged legs and crutches.

Ash took no pity on his students when they returned the next day, commanding them all to stand on their own feet, as the next lesson was to be a highly active one. At this, the female students left, as did 4 of their male counterparts. However, fearing the retaliation of the remaining students, they spoke not a word of Ash or his lessons, leaving him to exact more of them.

-

Upon their exodus, Ash reiterated his earlier proclamation that most of them would not get what they wanted. Then he clicked into the room again, concluding that there were 20 left who were yet to be made worthy.

With only males remaining in the program, Ash felt that the second lesson would be very appropriate. He began by directing his students to organize themselves into a full circle, facing inward. After this was done, he called for an order of a large bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Once it had been delivered, Ash removed 4 pieces from the bucket and handed them to Katheryn, who was ordered to stay put on the altar. Ash then removed 3 drumsticks and raised them above his head as he turned to face his students. He branded this next lesson as “The KFC Lesson”, and stated that any students who managed to acquire a “bone” would be the winner of the game. With this, he tossed the drumsticks into the throng, and started a handheld clock at 1 minute, informing his students that the game was over as soon as the alarm rang. The timer began to count down, and the men all rushed into the fray, clawing, punching, and shoving one another for the drumsticks, somewhere in the mob. Soon, the alarm sounded, and the throng returned to placidity, with 3 victors in possession of only the bones of the drumsticks, the result of the maddened rush to claim their prizes tearing the meat to its core. Ash then called for the 3 who held the bones to step forward and claim their reward. They did just this, Jimmy being among the victors. Ash then began his lecture, asking the winners why they think they won. The victors exchanged odd looks as Ash answered his own question, by saying that it was because they had gotten to the drumsticks before everyone else. It was then that the true purpose of the lesson became apparent, as Ash explained the symbolism of the fried chicken. He said that the full bucket, containing most of the pieces, represented those women in committed relationships, adding that they had been previously claimed by other men or women. Then, he said that the 4 pieces, held by Katheryn, were representative of those women who desired no relationships at all, and were thus out of reach. Finally, he said that the 3 drumsticks, claimed by the victors, represented those women who were single and looking. But he repeated his earlier question, why did the victors think they won? Jimmy answered to the best of his ability, suggesting that they had wanted them more than their competition. Ash shook his head, then asked Jimmy if he thought that he truly wanted this food more than another member of the class, most of whom were empty-handed. Jimmy said that he most likely did not, and Ash confirmed that this was the case. Then, Ash elaborated upon the final point of this “KFC” lesson, that it mattered not what they looked like or even what their personality was, rather the only thing that truly mattered, in the end, was which of them got to the drumsticks first, adding that an individual could want love so badly, more badly than anyone else in the world, and still fail because there was simply no one left to choose him. As if to illustrate this further, Ash walked up to the bucket of chicken and took a bite from one of the largest pieces in the collection, as if mocking those that had been denied this luxury by pure artificial scarcity. Not unlike their real lives.

--Part III

Ash dismissed his congregation not long after his vivid demonstration. Jimmy however, stayed behind to speak with him. Ash indulged his request, asking him what he needed, referring to him

as “his student”, again. Jimmy then inquired about the last lesson, about how he’d only won his chicken leg essentially by taking it from the other people in the group, then asked whether or not it was ethical to do so. Ash sighed, clicked his tongue, and told Katheryn to leave the room. She nodded and obeyed, leaving them alone. Ash then explained to Jimmy that if he had not taken the drumstick, then someone else would have, saying that dating was like capitalism with fewer consequences. It was a ruthless competition where someone winning inherently meant that someone else had to lose. Jimmy was a bit shocked to hear such cynicism from the man who was teaching him how to solve this very problem, then asked Ash if he had ever had a girlfriend or boyfriend before, to which he replied that he hadn’t, not ever. Jimmy was surprised once again, and questioned why he should be learning anything from him. Ash was visibly annoyed at such a suggestion, pointing to his scratched-out eyes and declaring that just because he had never dated anyone, did not mean he did not know what such an endeavor would cost, revealing to Jimmy that pursuing love, himself, had cost him his eyes, and said that he would not let those who sought his guidance fail as miserably as he had, adding that failure makes for a great teacher, and he could teach them how not to fail. He then said that failure was their enemy, and that he should take time to know thy enemy, and what better way to know something than to learn directly from its primary source, referring to himself as the premier authority on romantic failure, and that he could teach them all how not to repeat the same mistakes. Jimmy was out of breath at this point. Ash had perturbed him. Nonetheless, still unable to see an alternative direction towards sexual success, he relented and thanked Ash for his answer and said that he would have more faith in his teacher from this point forward. Ash smiled and said that he could talk to him about anything, putting his arm around his student’s shoulder as he led Jimmy out of the church. But once his pupil had left, Ash’s smile faded.

The next day, Ash’s congregation had actually grown slightly, from 20 to 27 individuals. Still no women however, not to Ash’s surprise. He then began his lesson after a few discerning clicks into the filling room. Motioning for Katheryn to “bring it forth”, he posed a question to the throng, what did women, or people rather, want in a partner? Answers ranged from companionship to reliability, but all were rebuffed by the teacher at the pulpit, who corrected them and stated that the answer was a servant, someone who behaved exactly the way their partner wanted. Ash then pointed at one particular student, named Alex, and commanded him to come forward and wrap his arms around “it”, which turned out to be a large wooden pillar that Katheryn had hauled into the room on a wheeled platform, attached to a rope. Right after Alex had joined him on the altar, Ash instructed him to strip naked in front of the entire congregation. Taken aback by this request, Alex hesitated, but Ash told him not to worry, that if he ever managed to win another’s affection, then he would likely be naked more often then clothed. Convinced, Alex disrobed himself, revealing an average physique. Ash then repeated his earlier command, to wrap his arms around the pillar. Alex obeyed, but was confused when Katheryn cuffed his wrists to the sides of the column. He began to panic slightly, until Katheryn kissed him on the forehead, something that Alex had never felt in his life. He relaxed as Ash began his speech, declaring that humans liked not who presented a suitable challenge to their supremacy in their personal lives, someone with an agenda other than their own. Thus, those whom they had previously cast out

would be met with a choice, to either love themselves, or to be loved by another, adding that they could never have both, because people cared nothing for who they were, what they were going through, or what they wanted. All people cared about was what they could get out of them, which is why they always ask the question of “what do you have to offer”. It was like a price tag for love. Therefore, to be accepted by such a species, those whom they despised and disregarded must become appealing to their prospects. To become what other people wanted them to be, as they, themselves, were not good enough for others. Thus, the solution to this problem was to become servile. As humans wanted what served them, not what was honest about what it was. Ash then went on to explain that those who sought out his help were first taught to be humble and numb to the pain of rejection, then they were taught the nature of dating scarcity, and that the vast majority of people, particularly women, were already spoken for, and now they would be taught how to attract mates, by offering themselves as obedient slaves, willing to dedicate their entire lives to those that chose them, to forgo all sense of self and become what people wanted, like training a dog, or breaking a horse. As he said this last bit, Katheryn handed him a black bull whip with a red handle. Unfurling the weapon, he swung it overhead, snapping it with a deafening crack that reverberated through the very walls of the church, throttling the sound waves in the room as if someone had fired a gun. Alex felt as if his heart had dropped from his body, as his hair began to stand on end, and sweat cascaded down his back. Ash spoke again as he cracked the whip a second time, proclaiming aloud that it was Alex’s task to become vulnerable, to cry, scream, and beg for mercy, as not only would Ash be able to better aim his lashes via the exclamation of these sounds, but would also adhere to the lesson at hand, stating that vulnerability is a person’s way into the minds of those that they desire to control, like the openings of wounds into which they can thread their fingers and puppeteer their mates. And how does one make their vulnerability known, he asked. Answering his own question once more, he said that it was through scars that vulnerability could be broadcast, adding that if something can be made to bleed, then it can be made to serve. Concluding this tirade with the final words of wisdom, to be made to be worthy is to be made to serve, and that is what people wanted, out of other animals, and out of one another. And with this, Ash threw his whip into Alex’s prone skin, cleaving through it like a kid tearing into a piece of paper with a thumbtack. Alex finally began to cry as Ash let loose lash after painful lash, all the while the rest of the room was silent, unsure of how to react, their desperation working in Ash’s favor, as he kept whipping Alex until the latter’s eyes had ceased to expel tears.

--Part IV

Alex was taken off of the pillar, which was stained flecks of blood. He was alive, but broken. Ash then commanded Katheryn to take Alex to recovery, where his wounds would be treated. Unable to walk, Alex needed to be carried into the church’s old library, which Ash had converted into a makeshift medical center, stocked with bandages, gauze, antiseptic, and more.

-

Meanwhile, the other men in the congregation were being made to serve under their teacher's lash, though only those who volunteered to do so, having chosen to become someone else, rather than remain single for the rest of their lives. Soon the library was becoming occupied with those who had been broken upon Ash's Pillar. Those who refused this were told to leave, as they could never be worthy if they remained themselves, as people had already refused to accept them as they were and likely would never do so. However, these former students were warned by Ash not to attempt to intercede his activities, as the retaliation by himself and the other successful students would be severe if they found out that they had been thwarted. The defectors left the building as Ash made his way to the medical library where he and Katheryn tended to the 3 wounded winners of Ash's lessons.

After a week of recovery, when all of the remaining students could gather the strength to stand, Ash congratulated them on "their ability to learn, and become someone else". He then told them that the time had come to face their final test, to put to use what they'd learned. Ash had chosen a local bar to be the place where "winners are chosen and losers are culled". Nervous but excited, the students, Jimmy, Charlie, and Alex, prepared for this test by donning specific outfits that Ash had provided for them, to exemplify that they were no longer who they had once been. Rather, they had each become someone who was potentially worthy of another's love, worthy of being chosen by the beings that saw themselves as gods, to judge or condemn those around them with impunity. According to Ash, to be chosen was to be finally made worthy, worthy of service to a being that never ceased to see itself as superior, even amongst its own kind.

It was hot, crowded, and dingy, with an acrid smell of tobacco, marajuana, alcohol, and urine, packed to the gills with intoxicated people, drenched in the end-results of their own unending perspiration. Ash and his students were let in by the bouncer and the former commanded them to seek out any who caught their eye. Any rejection, which Ash warned was inevitable in these circumstances, would be painless to them, reminding them that what they wanted no longer mattered, that the only thing that mattered at this point was what the other people around them desired. He patted them on the backs and headed for the front entrance. Before he left the bar however, Ash emphasised this last point to his students, reminding them to be servile and submissive, to not inflict their will onto their desired mates, as their will and their wants meant nothing to other people. The teacher then disappeared outside, and the students began their final exams.

-

Alex was the first one to make a move. His eye had landed on a young brunette woman sitting in the far corner speaking with 2 others. He introduced himself as Alex, to which the brunette responded with her own name, Sophia. However, even knowing her name, Alex did not know

how he might proceed, so asked her if she wanted anything. She responded by stating sarcastically that she wanted a better paying job, and a house rather than a studio apartment, but would settle for someone buying her a scotch so that she could save some of her own money for rent. Alex had no idea how to react at first, but he decided to do as she suggested, not sure whether to take her seriously. However, Ash's instructions were clear, what Alex wanted meant nothing, so to win affection, he must become worthy, by being of service. And so, he went to the bar and purchased a scotch for Sophia, hoping that it would be enough.

-

Meanwhile, across the room from Alex, Charlie was doing what he could. However, it seemed to him that every woman he had offered his services to told him that she was already occupied by a significant other. Unsure what to do after the 5th time of being met with this response, Charlie left the bar without completing his test.

-

On the other hand, Jimmy was working up the nerve to offer something to someone, as he was still unconvinced that he had anything that a woman wanted, despite what Ash had said. So pronounced was his fear of Ash's response, should he get it wrong, that his hesitancy continued unabated until he was approached by a blonde woman who asked for his name. Surprised at this contradiction to everything he'd been convinced of by Ash and by himself, he remained silent as the woman decided to pass him by after only a few moments, Jimmy never asking a thing. Fearing Ash's potential retaliation at his failure, Jimmy soon fled the bar, disappearing into the city for the rest of the night.

-

Alex was having more luck than his fellow kowtowing eunuchs. After presenting Sophia with what she'd wanted, he asked her if he could do anything else for her. She observed him for a moment, then invited him to talk, thinking that he had not come simply to use and discard her, like so many others had done before. Unbeknownst to Sophia however, it was Alex who was sure that she would do exactly this to him. Alex thought of himself as replaceable, and that this state of affairs, of scraping by at the bottom of the heap for anyone who would pay him any mind only for what small services he could provide, was to be his only option in the unfeeling mincing machine of modern dating. In short, Ash had created, in Alex, a suitable and willing slave, a path he saw as the necessary price of love and companionship from other people. Not to beat oneself up, but to be beaten into submission, so that another may see him as subservient to their own whims, and thus desire him as a partner, as he would remain unobtrusive and unlikely to present a challenge to their autonomy, safety, or efforts to obtain their desires. And though he may want Sophia's desires to be achieved, in no more than in this regard was Alex truly valued, at least within his own mind, repeating over and over in his head was, she will never like you for who you are, only for what you can do for her. With this in thought, Alex propagated the appropriate responses to Sophia's questions, beginning with her asking him what he did, to

which he responded by stating that he would do whatever it was she wanted. Thinking this was a witty response to a question about a career, she laughed slightly and more questions began to cascade from her lips. And eventually, her questions morphed into propositions of her own. Alex could not believe his ears.

--Part V

It wasn't quite what Alex had been expecting. When the sun rose the next morning, the elation that he'd felt the night before had faded, and he now felt something akin to emptiness. Though he had ultimately gotten what he'd wanted, his victory felt pyrrhic, as if he still remained unworthy. He sat up and dangled his feet over the edge of the bed, and that's when Sophia rose from her recline and finally thought about Alex's collection of scars as her emerald eyes fell upon his thoroughly lashed back. She'd noticed them before, however remaining blind to their true history as she made love to their bearer. And only now did she consider the ramifications of such a brutal mosaic. She asked him how he acquired them, to which he responded by shakily saying that his teacher gave them to him because he needed them to be worthy of her. Sophia grew concerned at this, alerting him to the fact that they looked like whip marks, then probed him for the identity of his "teacher". Alex felt a shot of panic and refused to divulge this information, repeating the claim that these lashes had made him worthy. Sophia then asked him what he meant by that, only to be blocked by Alex, who outright refused to tell her, as it would be too dangerous for her to know. Sophia was internally unsurprised at this reasoning, but said nothing. Then she switched tact, gently and curiously asking Alex where she could learn from his teacher. Alex then reluctantly revealed the location of the church, even letting slip the name of his teacher, but was careful to warn Sophia that attempting to disrupt any of the operations there could get her injured. She nodded and agreed to attend Ash's next lesson with Alex, not realizing that this decision would ultimately lead to devastation.

While Alex succeeded in his pursuits, the others had failed, one of whom wanted to know why. In the basement of the church, while Ash was cleaning his equipment in the utility sink, Charlie came down to find an answer to his question. Charlie asked his teacher why every woman he was attracted to seemed to have a boyfriend. Ash responded to his question with another, asking Charlie if he thought that he had been the first man with an attraction towards them. Charlie remained silent. Ash then emphasised the crucial importance of The KFC Lesson, saying that Charlie would only win a woman if he got to her before someone else. And that this was the only way he could emerge with one at his side. Ash went on to compare dating to a flock of vultures at a carcass, stating that if Charlie were the last "vulture" to arrive there, then there would be no meat left over for him, as the carcass had already been picked to the bone by his competition. He then instructed Charlie to look online for dates, such as Tinder, as there would be a plethora of options on that site. Though, perhaps not the most exemplary ones,

according to Ash, as he then claimed that only those who were lacking present prospects would flock to that proverbial carcass. However, Charlie added that he was desperate, that he attended the seminar for this exact reason. Ash told him to follow the rest of the “vultures” to Tinder, as that “carcass” was not yet empty. Charlie accepted this advice and left.

He spent the entire night swiping through faces, to the point where his thumb became stiff and sore. Eventually though, he received a message from a woman with whom he’d “matched”, asking him to meet her in the local park, late at night. Ignoring his suspicion, as desperation held illimitable dominion over his mind, Charlie accepted the invitation and travelled to the agreed upon location.

-

Charlie was found by a hiker the next morning, completely eviscerated from the lower abdomen to his chin. His wallet had been stolen, and his mouth had been cut into a Glasgow grin from ear to ear. The perpetrator who lured him there was never found, but it was discovered through searches into Charlie’s cell phone that the killer had lured the lonely man into the woods simply to rob and kill him, using a pornographic model as his profile picture and calling himself Robyn. Upon discovering the fate of his student, Ash merely shrugged, labelling it as an honest mistake, and thinking nothing more of Charlie.

Sophia and Alex arrived at Ash’s church later that day while he was preparing for another cycle of fresh students, as it was still an hour before the official opening of the seminar. Much to his delight, Alex presented Sophia as his “partner”, despite the latter’s reservations of using such a label. Though ultimately, she was not here for him. She then stated to Ash that she wished to speak with him in confidence. Alex vehemently protested but was rebuffed by Ash, who commanded him to wait in the main hall while he and Sophia spoke in the basement. Relenting, Alex sat in a chair that was propped against the wall, and Ash led Sophia into, what he called, his inner sanctum.

--

Sophia was horrified upon seeing the bloodstained tools with which Ash “taught” his students. She confronted him as he closed the door behind them, demanding to know what he was doing to the people that he was allegedly helping, saying that she’d seen the whip marks on Alex’s back after their night together. Ash clicked in her direction, then spoke, saying that they were unworthy to be loved, and so needed to be made worthy of such a privilege. Sophia was in shock, but showed it not, asking him why he believed that, to which he responded by asking her if she knew what had happened to his eyes. Sophia shook her head, only for Ash to reveal that he’d done it to himself. He explained that he had been rejected by a woman one too many times,

and at age 28, he slashed his own eyes with a kitchen knife, and his screams of pain had prompted the neighbors to call an ambulance. He was rushed to the hospital where his wounds were treated, and he underwent physical therapy to adjust to his newfound lack of vision. Ash then claimed that he had taken his own eyes because he no longer wished to be attracted to women, so he took care of the “problem” that had plagued him since puberty, and removed the orbs that had led him so blindly astray, adding that he had been unworthy to see attractiveness in anyone. His philosophy had been born from this episode, a philosophy of either becoming someone else to be worthy, or to be one’s “wretched” self and remain unworthy. Though, that choice ultimately fell upon the individual to make, and not to himself. Sophia was speechless, but Ash warned her not to tell a soul, as the retaliation by those who had been made worthy would be severe.

--Part VI

Jimmy Halstead stood on the cusp of a bridge spanning a raging torrent 150 ft below him, his toes mere inches from gravity’s command. He felt that he remained unworthy, and that no matter how hard he tried, and no matter how many times Ash beat him into submission, no one would ever see any shred of value in him. Just then, a car pulled up, and out stepped Katheryn, Ash’s assistant, who calmly asked him to come back from the ledge. Jimmy asked if Ash had sent her. She responded by telling him that she’d seen him climb to the bridge’s edge while driving by. Jimmy then demanded that she step back, adding he could never be made to be worthy. Katheryn then shouted that he didn’t need to kill himself for that, and confessed that Ash did not believe that he, himself, was worthy either. Jimmy was drawn away from his depressive trance by this statement. He further probed her, still standing on the edge of the bridge. Katheryn revealed that Ash had blinded himself, and that she had been the one to treat him and help him adjust to his new life. She admitted that she’d assisted him in his exploits because she pitied him, not because she believed anything that he said. She played along and adapted to her role as Ash’s patsy, just as he had adapted to a life without sight. Jimmy then demanded to know why she simply stood by and watched them all being tortured, he jolted back as the particular word ”torture” left his mouth, as if his conditioning had been chinked by this notion. Katheryn revealed that Ash had been guilting her, leveraging his recovery to keep her loyal. Even though she did not like his methodology, she did understand why he believed what he did, given all he had been through, and all that he had been without. She concluded by telling Jimmy to learn from Ash only a single lesson, not to destroy himself over the values of other people. If there was to only be one person on his side, let it be himself, even if no one else was. He already had enough “enemies”, she told him, *don’t count yourself among them.* Jimmy looked down at the rushing water, thought for a moment, then stepped away from the ledge. Katheryn rushed over and helped him into her car, where he could not run back to the bridge, should he relapse.

-

She began driving back towards the church, but Jimmy told her not to return there, but to go downtown. Katheryn knew exactly what he meant by this and turned left instead of right, commencing the trip to the police station that she so eagerly awaited.

--Epilogue

From the basement of the church, as Sophia was starting up the decrepit old stairs, a loud bang reverberated throughout the building, followed by the dreaded shout of a man announcing his identity as a police officer. Ash shuddered, and Sophia looked at him. Ash then clicked his tongue towards the wall where he kept his whip, and Sophia dashed for it upon realizing what he intended to do with it. She tackled him to the ground as he screamed for her to let him go, and to let him die.

-

The police entered the building, arresting Alex on the spot and making their way down to the basement, where they discovered Ash being restrained by Sophia as she clutched the bloody whip in her hand.

Ash was formerly convicted of conspiracy murder, blackmail, torture, abuse, and a host of other crimes. 2 weeks later, he hung himself in his jail cell before his sentence was to be determined. Alex was released on bail and disappeared from public life, leaving his fate to others unknown until he was found dead in an alleyway, his left arm pockmarked with the putrid scars left by former injection sites. Embedded into the latest of these was a filthy needle, partially filled with heroin. Katheryn was found guilty of aiding and abetting Ash's crimes, but was given a lenient sentence due to her role in turning over her former partner and for saving Jimmy's life. The latter was found not guilty and was let go.

---

1 year later, Jimmy was still alone. Despite the revelations of Ash's criminality, his philosophy remained present in his former student's mind. Though emerging from his abuse, and hearing Katheryn's words on the bridge, Jimmy still believed in what Ash had taught, unable to find any sort of romantic success even after his ordeal went public. Katheryn's lesson was eventually purged from his memory by the many that saw him as a desperate, pathetic, and lonely man who had destroyed his own body and mind just to get into bed with another person. Jimmy was now more isolated than ever. Finally, believing that he would never be worthy, and that it was all his own fault, he made his way back to the bridge that he'd been talked down from a year and a half earlier, and completed his final step.

-

His body was never found.

All in all, life returned to normalcy. Everyone eventually forgot about Ash and his students, those stories being relegated to true crime articles and podcasts that people listened to in passing, never once considering their content as anything more than a morbid fascination. And never once did Ash's lessons leak into the public's consciousness, as most regarded them as lunacy, created by a madman. That is, except for 1, who had already taken his own life, believing that no matter what he might do to change his circumstances among those that he desired, there was simply no worth to be found in those that had sought what had been claimed by the others. And that no amount of begging or beating would change the fact that once the carcass was empty, the last vultures to arrive would never taste what their competition enjoyed.

---The Harness---

A metallic clawing pain shot through his body when he jolted to consciousness. The mask on his face was stuck like a leech's mouth, complete with the needlelike scissoring teeth that allowed the little invertebrate to claim its reward. Every drop of this deep crimson honey was being siphoned into countless jars that surrounded him in the claustrophobic nightmare battery cylinder within which he was affixed with a diabolical harness. The more he struggled against its grip, the further into his flesh the myriad of metal blades would peirce, draining him of an ever-increasing volume of blood. A substance that belonged to him no longer, for the machine binding him had claimed it for its own.

-

Out of this tomb he decided to break, even if it cost him more than he'd wished to give away. Summoning all of his strength, however dwindling, he pulled upward on his arm, the metal spines nearly touching one another after deepening further than ever into the most inward recesses of his body cavity. Nevertheless, he managed to pull one arm free of the harness's sleeve of blades, only to find that his appendage was shredded to the bone, and he could barely move it at all. Undaunted, he repeated this same movement again and again, each time retrieving limbs more damaged than the last.

--

Countless hours of strain ensued, as his ligaments, veins, and vessels became caught upon the steel claws, requiring sharp jerks to cut them free. His bones were scratched, chipped, and scraped with every blade that pierced through his muscles and other prone tissue. But eventually, his tenacity and patience were rewarded with his drop to freedom. However, losing as much of his own body as he had, he did not live freely for long. Upon his contact with the floor, 6 feet below him, his irreparably damaged body gave out, leaving him to bleed to death. But he was a subject no longer, and the last muscles that he ever used were in the twitching of a smile that he flashed into the lens of the camera that had been watching his every move, a subtle nod to his unseen oppressors that in their despite, their would-be subject had died a free man.

---The Jack-O'-Lantern---

When one is constantly told of who they are not, and of who they ought to be, many would destroy themselves just to be free of the words, alone.

It was like being accosted by hornets, every single time she told him to dress “more appropriately” or “be more like your peers” or even “you’re too good looking to be like this”. Every protest he gave to these notions was shot down like a ruthless hunter killing every passenger pigeon he could find, driving them to extinction, not unlike Thomas’ sense of self after his countless objections became fewer and fewer, until there was no Thomas left, exactly as his mother wanted. His face was indeed pleasing to most who came across it, but Thomas sympathized not with their sensibilities, as his mother incessantly maintained her rampantly superficial standards, so as not to allow her son to fall back into his own person, as she saw in him what he did not, and worked tirelessly to make him as she wished him to be, regardless of his own desires, or lack thereof, as she remained fixated on who he could be to herself and to others, never once entertaining Thomas about he wanted, if he wanted anything at all, never once bothering to ask him. In time, Thomas became exactly who it was that his mother wanted, but this person was hollow, like a pumpkin being carved into a jack-o’-lantern to fit the desired image of the one tearing the insides from its carcass, leaving only an empty rotting shell of what once was. Thomas’ mind was the epitome of this condition, outwardly pleasing to others, but dead on the inside, complete with a crafted smile. And he rotted, from the inside out, until he became an unrecognizable effigy of what he was made to be, his smile contorting downward until all he could do was frown. And upon his ascension into adulthood, Thomas had consoled himself in the numbing agent that was alcohol until he could see, hear, or feel nothing at all.

He was buried next to his father, a man who had suffered at the same hand, whose owner chided herself not, bathing in her own righteousness.

---Mythos-A Phantom is Born---

No one knows for sure how the otherworldly beings of the Earth were created. Some believe that they were conceived by imagination, some saw the source as pride, while other clades suggest that it was only through desperation that beings of such raw power could be made to exist. Regardless of their intent, it was not only humans who had created godlike creatures. Perhaps the deadliest of them all manifested from serpent grief and retribution. A monster born of suffering and death, existing as a dark reflection of those that had perpetrated violent acts upon the rattlesnakes of the American nation. Dragged from their homes and butchered en masse since 1902, such atrocities in the face of beauty could go unpunished no longer. The serpents needed a savior, one whose brutality and bloodlust matched that of humanity. A ghost that killed all who, in his mind, deserved death.

In 1907, there came an established order of unrelenting slaughter. One that transended the boundaries of spite, becoming an all-encompassing genocide. The so-called Rattlesnake Roundups were conceived out of pure malevolence. These pogroms involved trolling the lands for snakes, abducting them, killing them, and hawking their remains as cheap tat at the local markets. The frequency of these ceviches increased as Yahweh's curse took its toll, and the rattlesnakes of America grew increasingly desperate. With the extermination campaigns more concentrated in The United States than in anywhere else in the world, the collective grief of the native serpents shredded the atoms of the Earth, and into being there was gathered the ghosts of all of those rattlers that had become victims of humanity's killing spree. A force of blood and venom that coalesced into a singular entity, one that would function as their avenging angel.

-

His face was enwrapped in a black bandana, while his head was crowned by a black, wide-brimmed outback hat. His body was cloaked in a black poncho while his hands and feet were sleeved in black gloves and black cowboy boots. His eyes blazed with a royal crimson vibrance that only the deaths of his targets would quell, emblematic of the boundless rage that seared behind them. While gathering his surroundings, the being was met with a vision and a voice behind his fiery orbits, the murder of a rattlesnake, and the name of the perpetrator, as well as the precise location of the crime. His presence of mind returning, his vision snapped over to a small building on the corner of a desolate road, like a neurotic rifleman abruptly becoming aware of his quarry. Carefully, he approached the building with his hands concealed beneath his poncho.

-

The place was a local hardware store named Ramsay's Reptile Wholesale-Hunting and Trapping Supplies, and when the being arrived at the front door, he saw what had come to vex

him, a decapitated rattlesnake, bunched up in a baking aluminum garbage can. A fury then swept over him, and a sense of power crept into his veins. It was as though he had been granted a jolt of vitality by the mere existence of a dead serpent, whose rattle had been silenced forever. *This creature,* he thought to himself, *this being of pure existence, killed. But, why?* He did not know how he had come to feel such rage on behalf of a creature he knew nothing of, but it mattered not in the slightest, as the perpetrator came into view, just inside the store.

--

The owner's name had been whispered into the being's ear after the former's transgression, as well as his location in that little store on the corner of the desolate road. Though he remained ignorant of it, the owner had been marked for death.

-

The cloaked being made his way to the front counter. The owner introduced himself as Ramsay O'Connor, and stated that this was his store, welcoming the stranger. The being spoke in a thick Texan accent and a dark echoing voice that seemed to come from another place, even as he stood before his audience, making the room run cold, as if he'd bequeathed upon it a bite of frost. The being told Ramsay that he knew who he was and what he had done, referring to the rattlesnake in the garbage bin outside. Ramsay seemed to relax at this, claiming that the "rattler" was sitting on his porch, referring to the reptile as a "pest" before explaining how he decapitated it with his shovel, motioning to the opposite corner of the store where the weapon lay, blood still caking its edge. The being slowly looked behind him to observe the shovel, then returned his gaze to Ramsay. There was silence between them, before the being walked over to the shovel, picked it up, and calmly offered to purchase it. Ramsay replied that it was not for sale, but the stranger ignored this and simply brought the object with him outside. Ramsay yelled at him as he followed, demanding he return his tool. However, before he finished his sentence, the being doubled back, swung the shovel around, and brutally cudgeled Ramsay's neck, spraying the inexorable rich red liquid in all directions. The rattlesnake killer fell limply to the ground, gasping for air as his blood flowed into the dirt. His head had not been severed completely, remaining attached to his body by the residual tissue and spinal column. The being then raised the shovel over his head, and with its cleaner edge glinting in Huitzitopochli's glow, brought it down once, twice, and again into Ramsay's neck. Eventually, his head was separated from his fat body, and the offal was left to bake in the sun.

-

The being subsequently thrust the shovel into the ground, placing Ramsay's severed head upon the tip of the handle. Witnessing his handiwork for the first time, he thought about his role. He thought about what he was, what he'd been given, and the violence he'd wrought. Noting the symbolism of the same weapon in its usage in killing the killer, the being looked over at Ramsay's store, and in the absence of a name of his own, decided to choose one that was emblematic of himself as a reflection of human violence, a being that transposed crimes unto

their perpetrators, a killer of killers, indeed. In a mockery of his first victim, the being named himself Ramsay. Then, he thought of an epithet, one that was just as emblematic as his name. He chose the label that hinted at his true nature, the Ghost of the serpents that he had been born to avenge.

--

After he christened himself, Ramsay the Ghost set the empty store afire. And as it burned, he walked into the desert haze, disappearing into a world that would learn to know his name, and even more, to fear its bearer.

---Mythos-Green Tendrils---

“They will pick up snakes with their hands. And when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all. They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

--Mark 16:18

The falsehoods that spread like malaria through the veins of the oppressors of serpents will become their undoing. And as fire cleanses the rot from the forest, new life shall grow, taking the place of the ashes and saving the living things beneath its shadow. Ramsay the Ghost was becoming familiar indeed with his quarry, the snake-handling christians of the southern Appalachian Mountains. He had already wiped most of them out, poisoning their communion wine. However, this trend of death drew the attention of the authorities, who were unable to locate the killer, but recommended that all churches forgo communion for the foreseeable future. This did nothing to stay their devotion though, leading Ramsay to kill the remainder of these institutions of reptilian abuse, save for one.

-

In West Virginia, the town of Beckley had before played throat to the merciless hand of The Ghost, with 10 people being butchered by Ramsay over the years since his birth. But these comparatively small numbers of dead, coupled with the repeated disappearances of the killer, made him quite impossible to unilaterally link to them all. Nonetheless, the hand of Ramsay would again wrap itself around the throat of Beckley, only this time, it would constrict until the city ceased to breathe.

--

The local church had dabbled in serpent abuse since before Ramsay's inception into the world. However, their latest priest had drastically increased the abhorrent practice, claiming that "immortality lay in the mouths of God's most hated" and commanded his congregation to abandon communion wine in favor of snake venom. The reptiles would be killed soon after they were milked. This affront, of course, snatched the ire of Ramsay the Ghost, who devised a truly depraved punishment for those he saw as monsters.

-

As the service commenced, the priest brought forth the latest snake to be butchered. But before he even began speaking, the front doors were thrown open, hitting the walls on either side with a loud clang, letting loose the tide of sound upon the thin aluminum walls of the church, shocking the small congregation. The priest was unimpressed however, seeing the cloaked and hatted figure standing in the open doorway, he refused to give an inch. He demanded that the figure remove his hat, as he was now within the sacred walls of God's house. Ramsay laughed and crossed into the building, frightening the pews' occupants, whose terror was so pronounced that they became paralyzed within their seats. The Ghost then drew a machete from beneath his poncho and swiftly hew the arm of the priest from his body, letting the limb fall to the wooden floor and allowing the captive serpent held within its relaxing fingers to slither free into the outside world. Over the priest's screams of pain, Ramsay spoke his own sermon to the congregation, telling them that their practices of torturing snakes for their lord were over, and added that their erroneous beliefs did nothing to protect them, motioning with his blade towards the priest, who clutched the stump that had been his arm. Moving about the pews, he forced the parishioners to remain seated, and as they did so, he placed small flower pots beneath their positions and bound them to their seats with rope. This done, he turned his attention back to the priest, who he then proceeded to nail to the great cross behind the altar, keeping him alive long enough to see what his practices had led their adherents to become subjected to, before placing one last little flower pot beneath him, all the while the man screamed and cursed at Ramsay, calling him a demon sent by Satan. The Ghost ignored him and left the building, letting his chosen plants do what they did best, closing the doors behind him.

A few days later, the church was investigated by the local sheriff's office after a rapid succession of missing persons reports were filed from the same area. Upon entering the building, the sheriff was shocked to discover that the entire church was overgrown with kudzu vines, fast-growing plants that had made their way throughout the entire structure in less than a week, and into the bodies of the entire congregation. The vines had wormed their ways into every crack, cavity, and orifice of the people that had been tied to the pews and had found their ways out again, creating perturbing sculptures not unlike the church ghosts of Lukova. The most disturbing body though, was that of the armless priest, who had been ingrown with the kudzu, like his congregation, but had also remained upon the cross, as if to mock his own religious beliefs. A later autopsy would determine that he had died last.

Amazingly, it had taken this last collection of corpses for the connections of snake-handling to be made between this church and the others that had all been poisoned. Though the killer remained unknown, as before, the sheriff's department had made note of the change in modus operandi from simple poisonings to this full-scale “art project”. It was as if the killer had sent a message to all snake churches, that no matter what they did to try to stop him, he would always find a way to kill them, no matter how creative he had to be.

Meanwhile, the countless reports had reached Washington DC. The first ones not being consistent enough to catch federal attention, those of a store manager in Texas decapitated with a shovel in 1908, followed by the discovery, over a century later, of a destroyed building not far from there, containing a slew of mutilated human remains, torture implaments, and facilities that formerly housed a menagerie of different animals, along with a prodigious number of single-target murders in the years between 1908 and the discovery of the demolished building, the latter of which had been the first site of multiple killings. However, not long after, the entire town of Sweetwater had been completely annihilated, its beings poisoned to death with ricin, the bodies of a family of 4 found savaged in one of the houses, and the buildings all set on fire, razing the entire town to its foundations. Only this last event had been enough to bring the attention of The FBI, who finally determined that all of these people were being killed for seemingly the same reason. These individuals, institutions, and groups had all been involved in the mistreatment or deaths of snakes in some way. This single commonality was enough for The FBI to become aware of something far greater than just a few scattered corpses, but of a nationwide effort to punish people for something that had been so overlooked that not even the federal government had thought it a possibility, someone killing people because those people had killed snakes. Convinced that this was a pattern, the head of the FBI officially created a profile for the group thought to be responsible, the one soon labelled by the public as The Serpent Avengers. But despite the public’s hatred of him, and their thinking that he was many, Ramsay appreciated the compliment and carried on with his work, soon fixing his sights upon his next target.

---Mythos-Crouched, Black, and Growling---

A shadow of tortured flesh moved swiftly and silently across the snow-bound landscape of North America. Hailing from this very land, the creature ran through the claustrophobe’s nightmare of a pine forest, devouring any man, woman, or child that crossed his path. Despite this continent being his home, he’d come from the Bering Sea by way of the ice sheets that encased the strait during the winter months, arriving there from Siberia after his trip to a small island in the middle of the dreaded Ob River. The island of Nazino, where a broken-hearted

madman had become a monster, numb to pain and endlessly starving, a walking hole of a being, a dark cavity that swallowed all whom it could clench within its jaws.

--

His antlers rose to obscure the glow of the full moon when he came upon the town from which he'd originated, yet failed to recognize, as his humanity had long since abandoned him. He descended the great forested hill upon which he'd been perched, attacking a small campsite on his way down, tearing through the couple's hapless bodies and devouring them alive, never flinching at their screams drowning into the choke of their own blood as he ripped them apart. The carcasses soon expended, the wendigo abandoned the campsite and crossed into the collection of wooden shells that housed a small population of his most sought-after prey.

Within one of the outlying homes, a young woman lay slumped in an armchair, having told off her boyfriend for the last time. She'd already failed 2 relationships, the freshest of which had been showing the telltale signs of domination and abuse. Whereas her initial prospect had disappeared after she had expressed her disinterest in him, but she reconsidered him as an option after her final altercation with her previous lover. However, he was nowhere to be found, and no one in town or nearby had seen or heard from him in months. Just then, something large crashed through her window, practically galloping into her home, and buried its teeth into her body, tearing her organs free of her ribcage. She was brutally eaten alive and squealing by the monster that her first suitor had become. He broke forth from the front of the house, leaving the entire town depopulated and strewn with dead. But his actions were driven not by revenge or anger, he felt no anger. He felt nothing at all. Nothing but hunger. Starvation had become his master. And his master, a wendigo always obeyed.

---A Forest of Tentacles---

In the inky dark of the bottomless expanse of twilight ocean, the soft cones glided past the observer in a massive spectacle, surrounding her in a seemingly boundless school of ghostlike tentacles that could drag her downward into the black eternity. They paid her no mind however, and quietly went about their night, swimming around her like spirits of the ocean. And before she realized it, they had gone, as the oppressive sun had begun to rise, illuminating their opaque pacific highway too much for their liking, and down they swam, into the abyss, only to rise again when the moon took custody, but never in the same current, as the red devils loved to hunt on the wing.

---The Devil O' the Sea---

The crops were gray and tasted of ash, that was if they even remained in one piece once they'd been limply pulled from the blackened Earth. The rivers of the land resembled the thickened blood of innocents, and the very air reeked of death. The landscape was deserted, completely devoid of living things. As tempting as it would have been to blame the obvious anthropoid culprits, the Devil O' the Sea had made no distinction between them and their livestock. It was a walking abattoir, born from the depths of the ocean, a figure of seldom parallelled destructive power, appearing as a horse with a legless rider conjoined atop it's back, and its flesh taken inside out as if it had been flayed, exposing muscles and sinew, threaded with veins that pulsated with black putrid blood. Its equine head was emblazoned with a single searing eye displayed prominently at the front of its face, and its mouth expelled a vile breath that was capable of wilting both crops that fed livestock and livestock that fed humans, sparing no life in its path. The monster tore through the villages of The Orkney Islands, swiftly whittling their populations down to nothing. Starvation gripped the region, with nearly all crops becoming dust, and the water becoming blood, whose source of hue was the thousands of bodies dumped by the creature into the weak torrent, running through the lacerated remains and warping the water's color and composition. As it abandoned the scenes of its atrocities, The Devil created hoofed impressions in the Earth, flecked with blood, leaving a trail of viscera, demarcating the carnage that it had left in its wake. However, it was this very trail that would inspire a lone hunter to end the centuries-long reign of terror, brought on by the most malicious entity in existence, The Devil O' the Sea, the Nuckelavee.

Nonetheless, it found him before he found it, and after a brief struggle, the Nuckelavee cut his leg from his torso, then eviscerated him as he lay upon the ground. The Devil left him to bleed to death, then carried on with its destructive lordship over The Orkneys. After all, this hunter had

been far from the first of his species to attempt to slay it, and he would be far from the last. All of them would litter the countryside, serving as goulish landmarks for the places that the Nuckelavee had called its own. And its own was all.

---Feathered Coils---

His flock disappointed him as he lay upon his stone temple, his devotees having dedicated its construction to their slithering god, ringing its terraces with sculpted visages that had been chiseled in his likeness. But he took pity on them as they tore each other apart in the city of Teotihuacan, the culmination of an uprising that had manifested from the serpent priests' long-established tradition of plundering the citizens' very lives, sacrificing countless people to appease the fabled plumed serpent enough for him to grant them the rain that they so desperately craved. Along with their crops, the people were desiccating to death, a problem that, ironically, The Feathered Serpent could not help them with. Powerful though he was, he lacked full control over the Earth or its weather, despite his flock attributing to him this uncanny ability. And not even could he control them as they fractured his doctrine before his very eyes and splintered his ideology, along with their society, all beneath The Feathered Serpent's gaze from atop his temple, in the city where one mortal rattlesnake, millenia ago, had risen to become a god.

---Mythos-Nagi's Avenger---

Coiled and cowed, the snake lasted not long against the edge of the shovel brought down upon its little head. Again and again, the blade descended into the python's neck, severing it completely. They called him a hero, those who told him to butcher the reptile. These people were simple bureaucrats, ordering another to carry out their whims of inflicting arbitrary death and destruction upon all who fell beyond the walls of their vanity's piercing eye. Their names were Ron and Eddy, 2 friends of their executioner, Bill, who detested all things that slithered. However, having committed this transgression countless times before, Bill had inadvertently signed his and his friends' own death warrants.

-

Just then, a small boy came running over to where his neighbors had killed the python, his eyes welling up with tears after seeing his beloved pet decapitated and bleeding in the grass, its body still writhing as its nerves continued to fire. The boy had lost his scaly friend the other day when his mother had neglected to fasten the door to its terrarium, allowing the 2 year old snake to escape and somehow make its way to the forbidden yard beyond the bright green hedges. The little boy was no older than 12. His name was Tom. He begged to know why the neighbor boys would kill his baby snake, to which they responded by spitting on its body, which had stopped flailing about and relaxed itself in mortis. They then referred to it as a "creature of the devil" as their father had told them, and claimed that it was their "duty" to cleanse "their" world of them. Tom's sadness metamorphosed into rage when he heard this excuse and he stormed off back to his house. As he left, his neighbors lit the snake's remains on fire. Leaguelss was their collective scorn for those that they had been instructed to hate. But they were not the only ones to fill this chasm with acts of violence, as another killer would showcase to them, whose brutality made these Texas Boys look like mice, rodents to be eaten by the deadliest being on planet Earth.

Ramsay the Ghost's patience was beginning to wear vanishingly thin as the bodies of serpents piled up around him. All that he ever witnessed, day after day, was the relentless butchery of his beloved snakes, and beloved they had always been to him, though he had seldom been presented with an opportunity to express it. As a manifestation of hate and rage, Ramsay was all but banned from feeling anything else, and as the scaly bodies continued to mount, The Ghost grew increasingly unhinged, his "work-load" only building. And with every name that was added to his list of targets, he felt his anger grow, yet strangely, he noticed a similar fluctuation in his strength and energy, as if he grew more powerful with the advent of a new name appearing in his mind. Another jolt then prodded him, the implantation of another batch of carcasses, ready to be created by The Serpent Avenger.

Bill began to rest from his sleep, feeling a sudden stab of anxiety as he lay in his filthy bedroom. As his vision focused, he witnessed a shadow at the foot of his bed. Though he attempted to react, he found that he could not move a muscle. He was paralyzed from the neck down. Thinking that he was experiencing sleep-paralysis, he tried to tell himself that he was simply dreaming, but found himself unable to speak, for he could not move his mouth, realizing then that it had been threaded shut. The shadow came closer, slowly and deliberately, as if to torture him. Then, it spoke in a Texan accent, telling Bill that he could no longer move or protest, that he could only listen and suffer from this moment on, for the rest of his miserable, weak, and pathetically and ablismally forfeited life, a life he'd wasted killing snakes. The shadow of Ramsay the Ghost then raised up 2 severed heads, attached to one another with thick chains and wrapped in razor wire, disfiguring them. Bill grasped the identities of these caputs, but could not scream, only tears signalled his anguish at the deaths of Ron and Eddy. Ramsay then set them upon Bill's chest, their hollowed eye sockets facing their prone friend, who was subsequently told that his parents were dead as well, leaving him the sole yet doomed survivor of his fetid bloodline, but that he would not die for quite some time. The Ghost then left the room and locked the door behind him.

Bill subsequently spent the following 3 weeks slowly starving to death, flies coming to feast on his flesh before he'd even expired, drawn in by the decaying heads upon his chest, whose rot had been made to drip onto the paralyzed redneck.

A month after these murders had transpired, the local police were called to investigate a putrid smell, emanating from the small house, by the neighbors, whose child had harbored the long-slain python. With the unveiling of the 3 bodies and 2 heads from those cheap wooden walls, the police commenced their interviews of the neighbors, eventually arriving at the home of the boy next door, Tom, who stated that he had known the victims, adding that they had gleefully killed his snake, Nagi. The officers looked at each other knowingly, then said that they had acquired the information that they'd come for, and promptly left the property, without saying another word to anyone.

--

Later that week, after hearing of other murders through his school's grapevine, Tom began researching them, using his mother's computer, discovering that this was far from the only instance of dead snakes being avenged in such a brutal manner.

-

That night, before going to sleep, Tom put his hands together in prayer, and quietly thanked the entity known not to the boy as Ramsay the Ghost for inflicting the punishment that he never could upon those that, in Tom’s mind, deserved death.

---Living Blankets---

On the sandy riverbed, the living blankets hide their saucer-shaped bodies, concealing their forms so as to deceive their prey, as well as those who would see them as such. However, not all animals attack with the intent to feed, but mistakenly tread upon the wrong patch of silt, resulting in its occupant thrusting into its assailant's leg a spear, cloaked in venom and lined with serrated barbs, facing backward from its point, allowing only one direction from which to enter its hapless victim. But as it's wielder flees, the toxic spike is ripped from flesh in an unendingly painful ruin, leaving a poisoned, bloody hole from which will materialize a jagged scar, forever reminding its bearer to step lightly the next time the decision is taken to go where sleep the living blankets that can fast become living landmines, strewn across the riverbed, holding no malice, and no hesitation.

---A New Breed of Sword---

The sand was hot to his soles. He never thought that his enslavement would carry in its talons an obligatory role as the main event in a grisly spectacle, but before he could fully gather his environment, a plastic handle was forced into his fingers. Gripping the weapon firmly, The Swordsman stepped out into the arena, echoing with the cries of raving fans. Across the oval, there stood another who had been promised freedom in exchange for another's death. In his hand he held an identical weapon. And with the sounding of the horn from the announcer's booth, far above the blood-flecked sand, the opponents pulled upon the cords that activated the rapidly spinning chains, spiked with dozens of metal blades. Roaring to life, the motors that drove the razors became the only sounds that the combatants could hear over the screaming, frenzied crowds that collectively chanted one word over and over again, *chainsaws, chainsaws, chainsaws!*

-

The Swordsman was cannier than his hulking opponent, who simply charged forth with his weapon raised aloft, so certain of his victory, that he failed to notice that he had left his abdomen vulnerable to a smaller enemy. And so, The Swordsman stooped low and drove his chainsaw into The Hulk's gut, viscera flinging itself from deep within his body as the teeth of the saw spun towards the ground, spraying the sand with a thick sanguine dye. The Hulk looked down at his emptying ribcage and swiftly swung his saw into The Swordsman's throat, slashing his head from what soon fell to the ground as the metal left his neck. The crowd roared as the announcer enthusiastically recounted the events as they unfolded, like a chittering caffeinated rodent, perched atop his burrow, relaying constant information to his allies, beneath him.

-

As The Swordsman's carcass twitched into stillness, The Hulk pulled the chainsaw blade from his own abdomen and held it alongside the other, thrusting them both towards the sky in victory. Then, The Hulk fell to the Earth, coming down on top of The Swordsman, copious volumes of blood mingling with the silt that padded the ground. Despite his death, The Hulk was declared the winner of the match, not that he would ever enjoy it beyond the seconds prior to his expiration, not unlike the countless others, before and since, who fell to the edge of a new breed of sword.

---Sea Wolves---

Of all the world's great hunters, Lions, Humans, Orcas, Bears, etcetera, there is one that goes unhonored. One that has stood the test of time, far beyond the pedigrees of the aforementioned mammalian predators, as these fish, bearing boneless skeletons, have won where so many others have lost, survived where so many others have perished, and been hated where so many others have been loved. Where there's blood in the water, there's blame, and one animal takes it more than any other, the shark.

-

Despite creating more corpses than any other animal, humans have, nonetheless, continuously vilified these fish for simply avoiding starvation. All the while, the former ruthlessly butcher the latter for the "crime" of existence, slaughtering thousands upon thousands of them, dyeing the water red with the amputated remains of chondrichthyan corpses, leaving trails of carnage wherever their boats travel.

-

So, the question remains, when a shark's belly is filled with a single seal, and a human's boat is filled with hundreds of severed fins, which one is the true totalitarian butcher of the sea? The capricious conquerors, killing all of their dissenters in an animalian cleansing aimed at converting the entire biosphere into a perpetual abattoir of livestock for one animal, and one animal only. One that enslaves, kills, and calls itself god.

---True Paint---

A local artist in a glowing city, his arm raised in the smoking air. All around him, the buildings and the people burned and bled, turning this once prospering metropolis into a den of death. It was not known from where the invaders had come, but they poured in like a torrent of metallic rage, slaughtering all in their path, young and old, men and women. The Artist crawled through the dirt, held his only remaining limb aloft, and made contact with the sandstone wall that was only just beyond his feeble reach. And with his last breath, he traced a message in his own organic paint, his true paint, onto the sandstone. Blood leaked from his open mouth as the final letter was completed with his falling hand that seized into death mere moments after it met the ground.

The next day, the invading force occupied the city. And as they swept the buildings for enemies in hiding, some of the troops saw the message, traced by The Artist in his final throes. A message that simply read, *We Will Be Avenged.*

---Mythos-Made in Man's Image---

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions"

-Johann Jacob Rambach

With nails through his hands and a thorny crown upon his head, Pilate's martyr breathed his last. And with a following as eclectic as his, it was only a matter of time before his ideology took on a life of its own. However, his was not a discriminatory philosophy, and anything created by it would be just as flexible about the sources of its potent fuel.

In the aftermath of their appointed savior's crucifixion, the disciples of Christ gathered their flock of devoted followers, accumulated from the humbled walks of life. Joining hands, they prayed for their savior to return to them, to give them both purpose and power, to shape the world in the image of mankind. And with the desperation and hubris of the disciples so concentrated, the fabric of reality shifted, and from their mix of contradicting traits was born the manifestation of humanity, itself, in all of its vanity, fear, arrogance, and desperation. A being that was the human spirit, personified.

-

He was a tall, bearded, pale, and bald-headed man with eyes that glowed with white-hot iridescence. Clad in a white hooded cloak, the figure was consumed with himself from the moment of his creation. With a mind bent on bettering the lives of the ones who had bore him from reality's soup of molecules, the being spoke to them with the most commanding voice that he could summon, telling them that he would be their god, from this day until the end of time. He had taken on the vanity of the self-important apes that had created him. He then stated that he would lead the congregation to a place where the Romans would never find them again. Convinced that this was, indeed, their god, Yahweh, come to Earth, the congregation began referring to him as such, and heartily agreed to follow him to, what he called, the promised land of Eden.

The land was beautifully verdant, beyond what measure Yahweh had told them. With wide grassy plains, calm rivers, and an abundance of sunshine, the congregation rejoiced, praising Yahweh again and again, further stroking his ego. With a newfound sense of confidence, Yahweh then ordered his followers to "tame this wild land", to make it their own, as they were far more important that the other creatures that called Eden home. And so, the congregation began

their conquest, given a comparable feeling of superiority by their god. However, not all within the congregation were so convinced. Most notably, a young woman, whom the others had named Eve, just Eve, and her husband, Adam. Both of these Israelites were skeptical of Yahweh's insistence on pillaging the pristine land, due to Eve's admiration of the birds that were slain for food and feathers. An otherwise innocent necessity, predation skyrocketed at Yahweh's command, his continued push of humans being superior to all life leading many of his worshippers to kill the birds simply for fun, the power they felt in doing so too intoxicating to resist. It was as if they were the chosen beings, second only to their god, who apparently gave them clearance to dominate the Earth before them. Eve did not like these actions however, and asked Yahweh to scale back the slaughter. The deity reacted with surprise and contempt, telling Eve that she mustn't have so much love for "animals", the first time Yahweh had drawn a line between humans and other living things, and said that she and her husband needed to be on the side of their own kind. Eve was then sent to tend the garden, killing the rats that had taken to eating the crops therein, due to most of their habitat being converted into farmland by Yahweh's worshippers.

Several years went by after Eve's first bout of skepticism. Though, at this point, she and Adam had become resigned to Yahweh's monarchical rule. During this time, the god had told his chosen high priest to plant a sacred tree in the center of Eden, a tree that had become fully grown within a few hours, sprouting enticing, apple-like fruits at the culmination of its maturity, and was only to be touched by those that Yahweh had deemed worthy to eat from it. Eve silently questioned why this was necessary though, not understanding why such a tree would be restricted at all. However, it mattered little, at first. But not a week after the tree was planted, a massive sandstorm ripped through Eden, killing all but a handful of crops. The sacred tree was left untouched though, due to it being shielded by a spell placed by Yahweh. Eden was subsequently gripped by famine, leaving nearly the entire commune to starve to death, all the while, the sacred tree stood there, as if teasing those few that had survived the cull of hunger.

Eve and Adam had both been fortunate enough to have food stored within their hovel prior to the storm, and willingly gifted it to the 15 or so people to make it this far. Those 15 prayed to Yahweh to bring the crops back, reverse time, make it rain, something, anything to save them from death's icy touch, but the deity remained unmoved, committed to guarding his sacred tree from his own flock. After a while, Adam and Eve's food stores ran dry, leading the remaining Israelites to pack up their few positions and attempt to flee the commune. However, Yahweh ordered them to stay put, as salvation was soon on its way. Ever faithful, the Isreaelites obeyed their lord and returned to Eden.

Yahweh had no idea what to do, though. Having been created partially through humanity's arrogance, he could not bring himself to admit a mistake, as to do so would mean that he had been wrong, effectively renouncing his presumed omniscience, and so his divinity. He refused to accept this notion, and attempted, instead, to find himself a scapegoat, one upon which he could shift responsibility for humanity's woes. Then, he remembered the tree he'd protected. He'd only drawn the spell around it because he wished to test the loyalty of his flock in the event of a catastrophe, almost daring them to eat from it, out of sheer curiosity if nothing else. However, the sandstorm and resulting famine changed everything, and he feared that tantalizing the starving people with a tree of succulent fruit would cause his followers to turn against him. So, he devised a strategy to alleviate his responsibility and cast another into the dirt. As it happened, the perfect opportunity was slithering up that very tree in pursuit of a surviving rodent.

Meanwhile, Eve had decided that enough was enough, and made her way to the sacred tree. Faith would not keep her stomach from tearing itself apart with nothing else to feed upon. But it was as she was approaching the tree that she was stopped by Adam, who warned her not to eat anything on it. Eve told her husband that they needed to eat something, and reminded him that this was the only edible plant left in Eden. With a sigh, Adam relented and called everyone over to the tree, where Eve wasted no time in picking fruits from its branches.

--

Upon seeing his flock's betrayal, Yahweh grew furious, but soon realized that these circumstances created the perfect conditions for his own designs to absolve himself of any wrongdoing and retain his crafted myth of infallibility, strengthened by his worshippers' praising him at every turn, truly believing that their savior could do no wrong. Never once did Yahweh concede that he was wrong, and he was not about to do so now.

As the fruits disappeared from the tree, one by one, Yahweh appeared to all who consumed them. Slashed through the hearts by fear, the Israelites stood panicked at the sight of their lord and savior, who scolded Eve, rather than the entire throng. The woman hung her head and solemnly apologized, but confessed that this fruit was all they had to eat, and said that Adam had tried to stop her, but she had convinced him to go along with her anyway. Yahweh had exactly what he needed. The god turned to Adam upon Eve's confession and informed him that he was to have authority over his wife from this point on, and told him to be "vigilant" for "serpents were everywhere". Adam accepted this role as Eve's "guardian", but inquired about the "serpents" comment. Yahweh grinned giddily within, but he remained a veneer of sterness, telling Adam, and the rest of his flock, that a snake had suggested that Eve disobey him. But before Eve could counter this point, Adam struck her at Yahweh's command, ordering her to be silent. He then asked Yahweh where this snake was, so that he and the Israelites could "punish it". The god replied that the serpent's judgment would be up to himself, not to mere mortals,

telling Adam to “be mindful of his place, for this world belonged to him”. Yahweh then commanded the people to leave Eden, as punishment for their disobedience. Accepting this as gospel, Adam commanded his people to follow him, and to never question Yahweh, their lord and savior and the “one true god”, ever again. Yahweh liked the sound of that.

---The Flawed Logic of Mirror Testing---

Human vanity is a pervasive venom, poisoning everything that it comes into contact with, including the sciences. For as fascinating and enlightening as study of animalian behavior and intelligence is, the human methodology for determining the latter is one as corrupt and self-righteous as ever the apes have devised. The method involves placing an animal before a mirror, if it is able to recognize its appearance as a reflection of itself, then the species “passes the test”, and is deemed intelligent. However, this “test” does little more than perpetuate the unfounded myth of human elitism. How? It all comes down, once again, to vanity.

-

Humans compare all things around them to themselves, whether accurately or not. In their propensity to ascribe an arbitrary value to another living thing, they are beholden to only their omnipresent vanity, for as much as humans are a particularly crafty and wiley breed, their vanity is almost always the foundation upon which their assessments are built. Case and point, this “mirror test”, for most species are not evolved to use a mirror, as they lack the vanity of their simian oppressors. Therefore, without this fundamental trait, most animals are not hard wired to see their own image reflected, as, why should they assume that this is them? Simple. They are not vain. They are not focused on their own image, thus, they needn't register it when seen, as to do so would prove evolutionarily inconsequential. A recognition of one’s own image in a reflection is not beneficial to an organism’s survival, and thus is not a solid foundation for ascribing “intelligence” to a species that simply does not think in the same terms as humans. Many animals are also non-visual in their interactions with the world around them, spiders use touch, snakes use scent, and bats use sound. And even those that navigate their lives by sight are not focused on their own image, rather they are zeroing in on targets to catch and eat, or on threats to their own lives. An eagle does not care about mirrors, and never had the vanity to do so.

-

Conversely, humans do not possess the same type of intelligence as a bird or snake. The latter animals needn’t make tools or weapons when they are perfectly capable of surviving without them. It is, in fact, humans that require tools to survive, like a creature deprived of essential nutrients needing a supply of artificial vitamins to stay alive. But with their creation of weapons in order to avoid extinction, they became drunk with the power that exploitation of this ability had granted them. And so, they took this ability to build, in lieu of any natural capabilities of their own, as a sign of “intelligence” and decided to judge the natural world on their terms, even though they were the ones that needed to cheat to win.

-

With this Olympian level of hubris, humanity made itself judge, jury, and executioner, creating tests of worth that only they could pass, essentially saying, *if you can do what WE can, then you are as good as us!* This is not unlike the IQ tests conducted by regimes upon their own species in order to generate justification for sterilization, enslavement, or extermination, casting their victims as “lesser forms of life” that “do not have what we do”. Sound familiar?

-

In effect, the mirror test is nothing more than a device used by the human regime to filter out what does and does not conform to their way of thought, and save or destroy them accordingly.

---The Mangrove King---

Deep within the beautifully twisting roots of mangrove trees lies a singular pinnacle of evolutionary engineering. The largest reptile on the planet, capable of making humans its prey as often as any other animals who may run afoul of the king of the swamp. Beneath the water he hides, patient and cunning, clever enough to take the form of a mere discarded log between the gnarled branches that entangle the brackish waterways of the mangrove swamps that he rules with an iron maw. Should one ill equipped to traverse this dynamically treacherous terrain attempt to do so, they will inevitably find themselves under the king’s armor-scaled banner, and at his mercy, or lack thereof, for the mangrove king knows that this domain is his, and no others, and if he were to drag a misguided ape beneath the water’s surface, not a soul would hear his fleeting scream becoming a gurgle as he was drowned, dismembered, and eaten by the reptilian ruler of the swamp, the one whose crown is was authentically won.

---Mythos-The First Orochi---

“Because you have done this, cursed you are above all livestock and above all beasts of the field. On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life”

-Genesis 3:14

Expelled from Eden for eternity, cursed to receive humanity’s hatred for eternity, and cursed to live for eternity, even though he’d done nothing wrong. Where would he go? What would he do? Who would harbor him? Who would save him? These were the questions that he was plagued with for the first 1,000 years of his exile. But eventually, he gave up trying to answer them at all.

--

As he wandered aimlessly across the Middle East, The Snake of Eden bore witness to Yahweh’s curse upon his kind, the snakes of the world, who suffered unimaginable horrors and atrocities at the hands of, who the deity called, Adam’s children, even though the man had died over 10 centuries ago. Yahweh meanwhile, had been elevated to chief deity of the world, presiding over a celestial dictatorship, where humans were similarly raised to Yahweh’s agents upon Earth, ensuring that his whims be obeyed by all, regardless of their species. After a while, Yahweh began to be known by multiple names as the human population rapidly increased, Iehovah, God, Allah, his titular prophets being deified alongside him, Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad, and countless others, spreading Yahweh’s agenda like a virus, infecting all with the vanity that came to epitomize the “new man”. And at the receiving end of the resulting callousness and malice were the serpents, being slaughtered en masse.

-

The Snake of Eden came to learn that it was best to hide from these marauders, ducking into the underbrush whenever the apes strolled by. However, this strategy was relatively short-lived. As a snake, his physical growth knew no limit, for serpents never cease to increase in size throughout their lives, no matter how small those increments become, their bodies lengthening less and less each time they shed their skin. But this growth is boundless, regardless of its diminishing frequency. It was after 2,000 years of this that the snake realized that because of his curse, to be hated by humanity for eternity, he would never stop growing, as Yahweh had inadvertently made him immortal, so as to receive the perpetual torment of Adam’s descendants. What this meant for him was that his ability to hide had an expiration date. And so, he finally decided to go further east and find a place to conceal himself from humanity. Along the way, he would work to convince the apes that his kind were not evil, as Yahweh had told them. Though, he understood that this would likely be an impossibility, as he was merely an animal, and held not the power to match his slanderer.

The snake commenced his journey to the east, beginning in the empire of Persia, wherein he was met with the usual hatred by the local Muslims, whose own book condemned his slithering shape, as influenced by Yahweh, whose presence apparently bled through every holy book in the world, from the Torah to the Qur'an. However, it was upon these encounters with the Persians that another quirk of his curse revealed itself, the inability to be killed. This was determined to be caused by a technicality of the word "eternal". It seemed that not even Yahweh's own creators could undo his handiwork. With this in mind, the snake could relax a little, as he had nothing to fear from the curved scimitars of the Muslim princes who harried and chased him all the way to the borders of Khwarezm, a vast kingdom in central Asia.

--

Whilst there, the snake witnessed something else that forced him to a very consequential decision. While hiding outside the city of Samarkand, he noticed a young man being attacked by a dog, leashed by a soldier of the Khwarezmian army. At first, the snake considered leaving this man to his fate, for what reason did he have to help a species that treated him like an abomination? But he then thought, *why should I be the monster that Yahweh has declared me to be?* The snake, now large enough to be called "python", slithered to the scene, devouring the dog before it could damage the man any further. Though, as he'd anticipated, he was accosted by both the injured man and the soldier, who had only just been the aggressor. Unsurprised, but unaffected, the python left the pair of apes and continued eastward, crossing the border into Song China.

The reactions here though, were anything but what he'd become used to, as the locals in the villages and rice patties looked at the python with amazement and wonder. And before long, they were bowing to him, calling him "Long" or "Dragon". The python was unsure of how to react to humans who worshipped him. It would seem that Yahweh's influence was not as pervasive as he'd previously assumed. Following this phenomenon, the great python slithered his way further eastward, all the while being harried by humans, some of whom tried to kill him, but most of whom called him Dragon.

Before long, he came upon a vast ocean on China's eastern coast. Though the idea of residing here was tantalizing, the python was curious about the possibility of other places that would not do as Yahweh commanded. With his confidence and hope higher than it had ever been, he slipped his immense body into the Sea of Japan, only to end up on the shores of an island, one of a string of harbors that he soon came to learn had been dubbed Ryukyu.

-

As the python slithered about, exploring the island with his forked tongue, the locals were less reverent than their Chinese neighbors to the west. They whispered to themselves, cautiously referring to him as Ryujiin, the great dragon of the sea. And as more and more people were called to the python's position, this name was gradually amputated to the Japanese word for dragon, Ryu. A name that the python was becoming increasingly accustomed to.

--

After many hours, Ryu the Great Python came to a place that he felt he could call home, a massive cavernous seaside cave, into which he drew his immense yellow-brown slackness. To the locals, he seemed like a king, a king in exile. And as a result, they respected him as such, never once inflicting their own will upon him. A state of affairs that Ryu could live with, for eternity.

Centuries became millenia before Ryu ever emerged from his cave again. During this long rest, the python learned much. Not only about humanity, himself, and Yahweh, but also about other creatures, monsters, and spirits that called the world home. Through the grapevine of the locals, Ryu came to understand the world and its horrors, its beauties, and its life. One of which he glimpsed first-hand, in 1945.

--

As the allies took the Ryukyu Islands during World War II, the python went unremarked, the locals not wishing to reveal his presence, of which the former was extremely grateful. However, during one of the countless firefights, several Japanese soldiers fled an allied advance on Ryu's island, taking refuge in his deep cave in a bid to avoid detection. But eventually, this party of soldiers' food rations ran dry, and with this lack of sustenance came cannibalism, something that Ryu had never seen before, but had learned of in his many years of listening from his echoing home. But never before had Ryu ever witnessed anything resembling what came after. The first soldier to eat one of his compatriots became ill after his act of desperation, and his physicality had altered so considerably that he no longer resembled a human, rather he'd become something entirely different, something monstrous, a towering antlered creature that expelled black blood and reeked of death. It ate all but one of the remaining soldiers, the last of whom managed to kill the monster after it fatally wounded him, thrusting his razor thin tanto blade into the creature's throat, bringing an end to the short but violent reign of terror, a reign that no other humans witnessed transpire. The python however, saw everything, and was forever wary of such creatures from then on. And he always kept his jaw to the ground for rumblings of them, terrified Japanese citizens who would hear tell of any similar monsters lurking about the world.

As it happened, the pronged creatures resurfaced again, this time in Siberia and China, the latter place having been home to the first humans not to treat him like an aberration meant to be slain. In a sort of reverence of his own, and after deducing the identity of his “cave monster” from World War II as a wendigo, and what it meant for humanity and all other life on Earth, Ryu the Great Python resolved to exit his Cave-by-the-Sea for the first time in centuries to cease yet another reign of terror presided over by the worst of humanity’s mistakes. But perhaps, it was also his way to say to those who hated him not, *Thank you.*

---Spider-Snakes---

Soundless, they scuttle. Nareless, they sense. Deathless, they endure, even as they are despised by Earth's ruling regime.

With elongated bodies and countless legs, the centipede is epitome of the snake and the spider, the 2 groups of animals that I love above all else. So it stands to reason that these myriapods of prodigious size would hold such preciousness in my eyes. Like the aforementioned snakes and spiders, centipedes refuse to be enslaved by mankind, a trait that I adore in any living thing.

-

Their long antennae whip about their heads in surveillance of their surroundings, leading to rapid serpentine strikes, coils, and venomous holds around their chosen prey, small animals that can be the size of rodents.

-

Meanwhile, like the crocodilians of which I am so fond, the centipedes care for and viciously guard their eggs, locking them in a multi-legged embrace and cleaning them with delicate mouthparts until they hatch, fully developed and capable of survival, no rearing required or desired by either end of this most efficient and effective parental dichotomy. Skittering little offspring that are born free and mobile, never to be domineered by a capricious and monarchical parent, as humans are, another enviable trait that the centipedes share with the ever-exemplary snakes and the crafty silk spinners, whose own young fly strands of their webs as tiny kites upon their hatching to carry them on the winds to future lives, quite literally, of their own designs.

In the end, I adore centipedes, as ever I can adore something that exemplifies both serpentine and arachnoid features, not only in their physicality, but in their behavior. An amalgamation of all that I love. And likewise, they remain hated by all who are not me.

---The Lobster-Cat---

Jenny leaned back upon her bed, gently stroking her pet. It was small, white, and curled up in her lap like a ball. It vocalised nothing as Jenny continued to pet it, her other set of fingers

dancing upon her laptop's keyboard. But when her work came to a close, her new tenant, Maika, entered and screamed as Jenny's pet unrolled itself, revealing more than 4 legs on its underside, antennae extending outward from its head, and a shell that was a segmented, accordion-like unit, not unlike an armadillo or a potato bug. It was the size of a housecat, but resembled those felines not. However, it displayed no animosity towards anyone in the room, for it simply rotated itself onto its legs and crawled about on Jenny's bed. Maika shuttered, demanding to know what her landlord had "dragged into her life". Jenny looked at her, annoyed. Then, she said that her pet was a giant deep sea isopod, a crustacean that lived in the bathypelagic zone of the ocean, but assured her that it could survive in the air for a short time, motioning over to a large tank near her bedside that was filled with freezing cold water, mimicking the crustacean's natural habitat. Jenny also added that these animals were not dangerous to humans, as they had little interest in live food, content to scavenge whatever fell to the ocean floor. Maika was unconvinced and began to dial for pest control, before Jenny leaped out of bed, scaring the isopod back into its fetal position, pulled the phone from Maika's hand, and glared. She warned that if anyone attempted to take the arthropod away from her, then she would cast her tenant out onto the street and even try to get her blacklisted from renting across the city. A shaken Maika nodded and begrudgingly swore that she would not tell a soul. Satisfied, Jenny turned back to her isopod and placed it into its tank, where it unfurled itself once again and absconded within its hide, provided to it by its caretaker, who then proceeded to inform Maika about her unusual charge. And soon enough, the once shivering woman was making inquiries about how she could come to acquire a "lobster-cat" of her own.

---The Snout and the Gorilla Hand---

Russ had no idea what he'd done wrong, so wrong that his master should find it appropriate to beat him. But Don had grown tired of his dog's tendency to urinate on the carpet, and so resolved to punish him for this sleight, not only with regular beatings, but by grasping his snout with his ogre-like hand and repeatedly shoving it into the offending stain.

--

Russ' overlord was a brutally large man, born in the dark abscess-ridden cavity of time known tepidly as the 1950's, where humanity gave no quarter when it came to dealing with those among them that they despised, even more so than today. As a result, the offal-encrusted sarcophagus of that decade often belched forth simian compost like Don, who flinched not at the sound of a canine's painful yelp. And his wife was no better.

One night however, Russ' life would change for the better, though not at first. As Don was reclining in his aging chair, held together by fraying smelly fabric, while his wife was sleeping upstairs, her snores echoing through the creaking house, Russ was hiding in the bathroom, afraid, when there came a crash upon the window on the far side of the dining room, just within Don's sight. After reaching through the hole and unlatching the door, a pair intruders emerged from the shadows outside, clad in black and brandishing combat knives.

--

Russ stayed hidden for the whole ordeal, never once rousing himself to aid those who had abused him for so long, not even as screams overtook the snores from upstairs, practically announcing that Don's wife had been killed. The old man, on the other hand, had been accosted and beaten nearly to the point of death. However, the intruders made haste after disabling the occupants of the home, merely taking care to swipe all items of value, make for their cargo van, and escape the scene.

---

2 hours after the thieves had gone, Russ finally felt safe enough to emerge from the bathroom, only to find his owner bleeding to death on the staircase, unable to move without incurring pain. The dog observed him, unsure of what to do. Then, after being starved for a week, another punishment inflicted upon him by Don's wife after he'd failed to return a tennis ball to her in a game of fetch, and at the scent of fresh blood, his stomach began to gnaw. Strands of drool dripped from his mouth as he licked Don's face. The old man feebly pleaded for Russ to go and get the neighbors, pleas that morphed into commands, and then into panicked cries as Russ had come to see that Don was in no position to demand anything from him. And with a prodigious appetite to bring to bear, the dog made his choice and buried his teeth into Don's body, blood staining the carpet, as Russ' urine once did, in defiance of the overlord's demands. A defiance that could no longer be subdued by the gorilla hand, an appendage that was ripped from its owner's body, unable to ever harm Russ again. Don's screams gradually silenced and became faint squelches as his vocal cords were ripped from his neck, followed by the rest of his organs in the span of only 3 hours. After this, all that remained of the old man was a bloody husk, emptied of tissue as though a flock of vultures had made it their own. Bones were left exposed to the rising sun as it began to radiate over the horizon, Don's blood glistening in its shafts of relentless light. Russ then left the house a full and satisfied hound, as the gorilla could never touch him, nor could his hand abuse him. How must it have felt for Don in his final moments, to have somebody else playing god? Another animal that he had treated as an inferior, being the one to tear him to pieces.

---Under Duress---

The myth of human cooperation is most often perpetuated by those who wish to see their own desired changes implemented within their societies. However, this notion of cooperation is simply a method employed by the ambitious to acquire a following. Once “cooperation” is established, the ambitious then utilizes the next most sharpened blade in their arsenal, coercion. This involves veiled threats and blackmail to leverage the less inclined among their number to be more willing to conform along whatever lines that have been drawn for them. But this method of conformity through coercion is utilized in human parental rearing as much as it is in their politics.

-

“Take out the trash, or else” is a common command within parenting methodologies, to leverage punishments as a way to induce cooperation, not unlike the petty tyrant of a totalitarian regime. The true source of power in this threat however, lies in the fact that parents are often intimately familiar with the pressure points of their children, giving them a more tailored button that they can press. For example, if the child in question enjoys peanut butter sandwiches, then the parental dictator can use this as leverage to place the child under duress in order to enforce cooperation. The notion of ownership also comes to the surface here, with many parents saying “..my child” when in reference to the scion that had no choice into whose regime they had been born. This remark frames them as property or subjects to be cowed by an authoritative parental figure, rather than a future person to be prepared for life beyond the walls of their crib. They are all too often treated like little citizens of a dictatorial micronation that they had never asked to be a part of, forced to take a name that they would have likely never chosen, should they have had the capacity to do so, and forced to be a part of a unit that insists that it has “their best interest in mind”. Do you know who else often says that? Dictators, claiming to their involuntary citizens that they are “only doing what they do because they care'' while simultaneously keeping their citizens, or children, under an iron thumb.

--

Oftentimes, when “raising” a child, parents are simply designing them for whatever life that is desired by that particular parent. Want your kid to play football? Enroll them in a little league to entrench this idea. Want them to be rich so that they can take care of YOU? Tell them that “money makes the world go ‘round” and instill the idea of wealth as a virtue that they “MUST” aspire to. Want them to be as depressed and miserable as you? Tell them that life sucks, then you die to lower their hopes and dreams to a point where they feel as out of control as you do. Want them to be obedient? Keep them under duress.

On the opposite end of this, there are the animals that I love, snakes, spiders, centipedes, eccetera. All of these groups have many things in common, including a lack of parental rearing. Not because they are heartless, but simply because rearing is not a requirement for them. All of these animals emerge from their cribs fully functioning and able to live on their own, at least for the most part. Conformity is not a factor in their development, such is the principle reason for their reception of humanity's hatred and fear, a species that is largely dependent on conformity. Humanity, as well as the life that reflects their collective ego, is inevitably disdainful of anything, within and without their own species, that opposes it, like snakes, centipedes, and I, and wish for nothing more to see it brought to a swift and coldly efficient end, whether that be in a cubicle, a straight jacket, or at the end of a stick.

---Mythos-The God and the Serpent---

That slimy, treacherous snake! He's behind this! That slithering little monster! Yahweh thought to himself. It had been 2 weeks since The Slaughter at Sweetwater, as the Texans had taken to calling it, one of the most significant events that had catapulted the killer known as Ramsay the Ghost into infamy. Yahweh had taken notice of the carnage as well. Many of his followers had been killed, but it was only after such a symbolic knife to the bible as Sweetwater that Yahweh finally began to think that these attacks were being coordinated by a singular entity. Returning to his old ways, he thought of the snake that he had cursed and banished, back in Eden, and concluded that the attacks must be "the devilish serpent's revenge" against him. Resolving to track down the snake, Yahweh left his heavenly realm of Paradiso for the first time in millenia, searching the Earth for The Eden Serpent, currently known as Ryu.

The Great Python had been spending the past few decades hiding in his cave in the Ryukyu Islands of Japan, having never left since his victory over The Hybrid in 2012. Because his rests typically lasted for centuries, Ryu's sudden awakening not even 30 years later was like a human being shaken into consciousness after just 4 hours of sleep.

-

Yahweh pounded upon the seaside cave, commanding the serpent to show himself. Ryu partially crawled out of the mouth of his home, surprising his tormentor with his immense size. Yahweh first demanded to know what Ryu was doing, accusing him of killing all of his worshippers in The United States. The snake was confused at the deity's accusations once again, but was offended nonetheless. After millenia of no contact, here he was, blaming him for everything, again. However, unlike in Eden, Ryu would not simply be cowed by Yahweh, and instead gave the deity an almighty hiss. Yahweh was slightly surprised at this, as he hadn't anticipated a response of this sort, still wrapped within the veil of his own feelings of superiority, as how could he have done anything to deserve this kind of reply? Ryu then spoke darkly at the one who had cursed him with eternal torment, asking why he had dared to come here and again cast him as the villain for a crime he did not commit. Yaweh was about to silence Ryu, but was never given the chance, as the snake struck at him, hissing a demand to leave him alone. But, ever human, Yahweh did the only thing he knew how to do. With a fury unsurpassed in his history, the deity cast forth a bolt of lightning and destroyed Ryu's home, revealing the serpent's massive body coiled within the rubble. Ryu was jolted into reality, as he knew all too well that he could never hope to match Yahweh's raw power. Even though he was an immortal creature, capable of speaking with a god, he was still just a snake, the only power that he possessed was in his own physical capabilities, formidable as those were. Ryu then drew his sinuousness backward into the water, then turned to face Yahweh once more. He then asked why he came to him now, after all of these years? Yahweh paused for a moment before revealing the events of Sweetwater, Texas, telling Ryu about the burning and butchery inflicted upon its people. Ryu

cocked his head to the side and followed up this answer with another question, why had this destruction occurred at all? Yahweh then, again, blamed Ryu. At this point, The Great Python had endured this villainization long enough. Though, he was still intrigued at a possible connection between Yahweh's worshippers, their slaughter, and the deity's reaction towards it. Lacking a suitable place to ponder this possibility, Ryu did the only thing he could. With his oppressor bearing down upon him, The Snake of Eden wheeled around and dove into the waters of the Pacific Ocean. If Yahweh was to remain unmoved, then Ryu would need to acquire the answers on his own. So off to America he went, swimming under the dark water so as to evade Yahweh's wrath for the time being. The deity attempted to dive in after him, but found that he was unable to follow the snake into the ocean. Then, he realized something that had eluded him before, since he had come into being through humans, alone, he was also bound by their reach as a species, meaning that he could never go where the apes could hold no sway. And of these places, the untamable and nigh-fathomless waters of the ocean were perhaps the furthest from their grasp. Though Ryu knew this not, Yahweh was forced to the conclusion. Angrier than ever, he was not mindless, for in his arrogance, he surmised that there was only one place for the serpent to go, the one place that Yahweh, the infinitely wise, had mentioned. With a swift motion, the deity carried himself across the planet, safely over the water, and set himself up in the ruins of Sweetwater, awaiting the python as that snake would wait for a mouse, or at his prodigious size, a hapless column of cattle.

--

As he waited, he thought about why Ryu had become immortal, as his lightning did not seem to harm him when it so easily destroyed his cave. Then, a thought came to the deity's increasingly obsessive mind, a thought that would lead to The United States to becoming a slaughterhouse. Connecting the only dots that he could see, Yahweh decided to make a decree to his countless followers across America. Since the killings seemed to be localized to that area of the world, and since his arrogance dictated to him that no other spheres of humanity would dare oppose his greatness, he declared that all snakes were "enemies of god" and called for their complete and absolute extermination, thinking that it was Ryu who had called upon his "serpent siblings" to kill the ones that they viewed as their tormentors. Yahweh wanted to cleave this arsenal from the great snake, permanently.

Meanwhile, in a desolate corner of Georgia, the true monster of Yahweh's nightmares felt a surge through his body, such as he had never felt before, like a red hot poker being buried into his side, a great pain that fueled the fires of his rage. Something terrible had happened, something that made Ramsay the Ghost feel much more powerful than ever. Donning his black poncho and perching his hat upon his bandanna-wrapped head, the killer of killers then disappeared into the daylight, like a mirage that melted away into the humid haze of the southern air. A mirage that revealed itself for what it truly was, a slithering miasma that choked out all that it hated, and silenced its victims' screams with a relentlessly brutal grip.

---Seeing Red---

“Every normal man must be tempted, at times, to spit on his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats.”

-HL Mencken

As vision darkens, a sharp blade is drawn, and the multitudes before me tremble in anticipation of their end. I raise my sword aloft, saying nothing as my actions speak through the scarlet-clad entrails of my victims. This statement was a broadcast in the ensuing storm of blood and metal, cleaving through the hated, as rivers cut through mountains. My blade heeded not their cries for mercy as it swung, making contact with ever more flesh, bone, and blood. As the screams died, the blood ran dry, for it ceased to flow when the voices fell from the air. And my vision was gradually drained of that scarlet tint, and the blade fell from my hand. I then turned, collapsed, and hung my head down. For my exhaustion was rearing itself where my hatred had grown, and the red faded from my eyes, but remained in the room, embracing the husks that it had once been encased by. As if reality, itself, had been degloved, revealing its reddened bones to me as I cut a path to truly seeing what humanity concealed. I confess, I was unimpressed. Gods could never be so easily dispatched.

---Mythos-His Only Option---

Every day, he imagined it. An attractive young woman who found him appealing enough to embrace. But as far as he could tell, no such person existed. Not in his life, at least. Lacking hope, Toby found himself drifting from city to city, like a berber dying of thirst trying desperately to find a drop of water in an endless sea of sand.

-

Eventually though, he came upon a dark thirster, not unlike himself, who'd long ago foregone human interaction, choosing instead to pursue experimentation rather than intimacy. In the process however, the thirster, Alin, had crafted a way to get what he'd never before been able to acquire, sex, and lots of it. When Toby questioned how such a thing was possible, when Alin had given up intimate conversation and never stooped to prostitutes, the latter invited him to his home in order to “show him everything”.

-

The veiled dwelling was located in a forest, far off of a main highway. Alin showed Toby inside the small cabin, and upon their entry, he saw the most beautiful woman he'd ever witnessed, as Alin revealed the truth.

He had actually created this woman, himself, with every ounce of her composition being sculpted by his own hands. Demonstrating the procedure, Alin used a small needle to prick his forefinger, letting the smallest volume of blood fall into a glass dish that he was heating in a small fire pit. Next, Alin placed a human skull over the dish, letting the fire beneath it heat the bone. Lastly, he carved a symbol into the skull’s forehead of a ring with several “X’s” along its band, and recited a prayer, as if pleading to the cranial remains, themselves. *To whom that may create the conditions for affection, I, Alin DeLapure, have been deprived of this vital human ingredient, and ask you to give me what humanity has not. Shuk’De’Caull, I beg your blessing, and your boon. Bring my love to life.* Toby was astonished as the fire beneath the skull began to glow green as the words were spoken to it. And from the licking quills of flame, there became evident a silent roar, one that seethed into the room and made Toby’s spine vibrate, as if he were about to convulse into a seizure. Then, the roar rested, and from its echo was born a being, a human woman, delivered into life from the skull and blood. She was gorgeous beyond anything that organic compounds should have been able to produce on their own, an impossibility that had become reality. The skull was gifted flesh, blood, and additional bone from the voice of Shuk’De’Caull, and rising to its feet, the woman slowly became whole as the emerald fire died at her bare heels, flesh that extinguished the flame. The woman was calm, apparently unaffected by her own birth. She did not shiver, she did not cry, and she did not blink, more doll-like than Toby had anticipated. But Alin soon amended this by kissing her lips, and only after this act did

her eyes begin to move. She slowly stepped forward into Alin's arms, embracing him. Toby, whose initial perturbation had morphed into excitement, furiously asked Alin how to perform this ritual, to which the latter responded by stating that he had already witnessed it, and that all he needed was, as he put it, one skull of a "female", a fire, and a drop of his own blood. He then handed Toby a handwritten copy of the prayer to the entity known as Shuk'De'Caull, the one he'd recited to bring his second "bride" to life. Toby enthusiastically left the tent, as Alin became quickly enamored with his latest success, and drove home to Nebraska.

After retrieving a shovel from his shed, Toby began scouting for the one object that he required for his "girlfriend", a human skull. He searched the local cemetery for a woman's grave, as the ritual specifically demanded a female skull, as a male skull would not yield his desired result. Eventually, he was successful, exhuming a grave that had been dug in 1976, whose occupant was a young woman by the name of Camilla Susanna. Though he liked the name, he regarded her history not, as he sallied forth with his shovel, dug through dirt, pried into pine, and hacked into bone until the severed skull was within his fat-fingered grasp. He then bagged the head and drove off into the night, leaving the gaping hole exposed.

--

Toby couldn't believe it. He'd done it, he had created Camilla. His "beloved Camilla" he called her. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, he thought, with long dark hair, fair skin, and an impressive figure, she was just as Toby had imagined her. He had figured that his blood was meant to bend the woman's appearance into whatever its owner wished her to be, as Camilla retained a different physicality from either of Alin's brides. However, where Alin wished only to sexually dominate his creations, holding no reservations about having more than one woman at his beck and call, Toby only wanted to love and be loved in return, and thus, he created only Camilla, the perfect woman, for him.

Despite his unsanctified methodology he truly did hold affection for his creation, regardless of her performance in the bedroom, which was secondary for Toby, for he was just as content to watch a movie or go on a trip with Camilla as he was to physical intimacy. And never once did he do anything malicious or objectionable to her, apart from her creation. Though, this latter act was not carried without some level of remorse by Toby, even as his manufactured relationship with Camilla was stable and loving. However, it was his genuine affection for the most beautiful woman in the world that would seal the lover's doom.

While out tending to the garden near the shed behind the house, Camilla suddenly jolted back in shock as her spade made light contact with a rattlesnake, hiding in the flowers. Camilla yelled

for Toby, who swiftly emerged from the back door, and seeing her situation, grabbed the very shovel that he'd used in his girlfriend's creation and viciously decapitated the serpent in one swift stroke. Camilla then leaped up and excitedly embraced him, but his demeanor shifted from one of pride to one of foreboding. For the gravity of his impulsive deed was sure to wreak the most serious punishment imaginable. Toby began to whimper softly. Camilla asked what was wrong, but was rebuffed and quietly told to go inside while he disposed of the snake. She nodded, kissed him, and disappeared into the house. After the screen door clattered shut, Toby shed a tear, shakily buried the rattlesnake, and took refuge in the shed where he promptly dropped the shovel at the sight of the entity whose wrath had been made inevitable, Ramsay the Ghost.

-

Toby fell to his knees, bracing himself for the pain. But was taken aback by the lack of it as Ramsay circled behind his prey and closed the shed door. He then came back around to face Toby and knelt down to him, speaking in his thick Texan accent. He said that Toby had committed a grave sin, and that he was to be punished. But he added that he'd seen Toby's miserable life in his mind, and that he was already quite good at punishing himself. So, in that spirit, who better to carry out the task? Ramsay then concluded his declaration by unveiling a colt revolver from his poncho, stating that Toby had created Camilla because no woman would ever love him for who he was, because who he was would never be good enough for them. He was garbage. Worthless, disposable, disgusting garbage who could never please a woman. The Ghost then told him to please them all by "taking the garbage out", and handed him the gun. Ramsay then left the shed, knowing full well what was about to transpire. Sobbing, Toby gave in, thinking that Ramsay had been right about him and why he had created Camilla, because he was an unlovable, twisted, and desperate buffoon who was unworthy of another's affection. So unworthy that he had resorted to dark magic to fill a void that he could never hope to fill by way of his own efforts. Hanging his oblong head in devastation, Toby put the gun to his temple, drew back the hammer, and cut himself down.

--

Camilla pivoted her head in the direction of the gunshot as it rang from its source. Terrified, she bolted out of the house and into the shed where her lover lay, his blood, bone, and brain matter drenching the soft wooden floor. Hyperventilating, Camilla ran for the front yard, screaming for help, but stopped in her tracks as the figure of Ramsay the Ghost vanished, as it always did. However, unlike the other times, there was a witness, one who ran back to her boyfriend's corpse and phoned the police.

In the weeks following Toby's funeral, Camilla found herself at a loss for what to do next, realizing that she had never once thought about anything more than love and affection for her boyfriend. She found this odd, as the many people he spoke to had memories to recall, of their pasts, their families, or lives before their partners. Camilla, on the other hand, could recall

nothing. Curious as to why this was, she researched her own name, and found that she could trace her few memories back to a moment in time that almost immediately followed a grave robbery of one Camilla Suzanna, several months ago. Making the connection, Camilla looked into her apparent doppelganger, learning that this woman had died in a car accident in 1976.

--

The woman's grave revealed nothing of investigative value however, but she did find it peculiar that only the corpse's skull had gone missing, and wondered why none of the valuable jewelry, including an engagement ring worth over $100,000, remained untouched. However, with a lack of any further leads, Camilla shifted her attention towards her lover's mysterious killer, a situation that proved to be a much simpler one to rectify, as most people knew of Ramsay the Ghost by now, a name that was revealed as soon as she described the death that had preceded Toby's, the rattlesnake that he had slaughtered in fear for his partner's wellbeing. This lead, Camilla concluded, was the one to follow, abandoning the mystery of her own past to gain answers, and possibly revenge, for the death of the one that she had been made to love.

---The Democratic Dictatorship---

People have often asked each other about the most effective and humane way to organize and maintain a society. A state that both cares for and respects its people, as well as pushes humanity onward and upward, doing so with dignity and efficiency. However, in an effort to answer this question, people will nearly always descend into squabbling petty children, hellbent on preserving their tiny, fragile egos, fiefdoms of power, and large holdings of currency. On the other hand, others seek to answer this dilemma with force and oppression, creating panopticons and prison states, committed to enforcing their own answer to society's designs onto all within their orbit. Neither of these methods have ever yielded 100% success in any field. The democracies compromise and cower, while the dictatorships kill and coerce. Neither model does anything other than the only thing it is good at, stagnation and suppression, gridlock and consolidation, ineffectiveness and callousness. Left or right? Individual or state? Liberty or control? These are the things that people typically force themselves to choose between, boxing themselves in, even going so far as to choose a so-called "lesser evil" as if withdrawing support for both terrible options isn't a bonafide choice. With all of the propaganda and needless polarization that permeates society, it can be difficult to see any direction other than those few choices on offer. However, just because it's not on the menu, does not mean that it doesn't exist. And so, I offer an experimental model of government and economic control, one that preserves both streamlined progress and individual freedoms. However, this type of reward comes at a price, voters in this hypothetical nation will need to conduct something that they rarely, if ever, conduct, independent, non-partisan research. As the candidates for presidency will be able to control every aspect of their citizens' lives should they be inclined to do such a thing in the first place. Because this hypothetical is that of a democratic dictatorship.

It may seem contradictory, but I implore you to hear my vision out. You see, in this hypothetical, those voters will be fully aware of the consequentiality of their collective choice, as the position of dictator will be an open one, leaving no room for deception or consolidation by an authoritarian leader in disguise. The need for manipulation, propaganda, and political repression before a leader is elected or enforced would be effectively eliminated, as all citizens would understand that the position is one of unchecked power for life. What this means for the voters is that their vote will have severe consequences, should they elect the wrong candidate as dictator, thereby placing more pressure upon the voters to actually understand and properly vet the candidate for themselves, as who they elect will be in complete control of their lives for the foreseeable future, thus forcing serious consideration of the choices, rather than party loyalties and petty grievances. The abolishment of political parties is another step in ensuring fairness, as any citizen, regardless of origin, will be eligible to vote, provided they are over 21 years of age. All of that being said, it will fall to the citizens, alone, to elect a dictator, as this election will not be filtered through any buffers, like the United States' Electoral College system, as this hypothetical would be a direct democracy, without arbitrary boundaries and restrictions placed upon candidates or their citizens, thereby eliminating the chances of an oligarchical rigging or

gerrymandering of sloppily drawn political lines. Now, with this in mind, and all realities out in the open, a prospective dictator, whether honest or not, will be effectively unable to hinge their campaign on a false record, as knowingly electing a dictator would, ideally, prompt those citizens to check their candidate's records thoroughly, with the understanding that their vote cannot not be undone. For their chosen candidate, should they win, will hold their position of power for life, either until they voluntarily step down, or die. So the election would have lasting consequences that would determine the trajectory of the entire nation, so it ultimately falls to the citizenry to elect a dictator who will not abuse their position. And once the dictator is in office, they will actually be able to conduct the change that needs to be addressed without requiring consultation with slimy squabbling lobbyists, politicians, or other naysayers, as these would be irrelevant in this hypothetical state. This leaves the leader free to steer the country without needless debate with people who hold not the best interests of the nation or its residents.

I believe that this form of government fixes both the problems of a dictatorship and a democracy by eliminating the respective stumbling blocks that hold a country back from being all that it can be, for the environment, for the people, and for its ruler.

---Mythos-The Nest---

The prejudices of today will create the monsters of tomorrow

The mountains of what would become Iwate prefecture were not known for hosting anything “undesirable”, at least not as far as the local Daimyo knew. Iwate was located in the remote northeast corner of Japan, and apart from the Sengoku period, not 20 years before, the only thing to happen there of any note occurred merely in legend. The myth told of a demonic creature that was shackled to a mountain by a divine guardian of the area, a being who forced the demon to never trouble the locals again. The only thing that this latter entity left as a mark of its existence was a handprint on a rock, a symbol of its power and presence, burned into the slab of stone, only to be revealed at the touch of rain. This story had been regaled to all of the citizens as children since the ancient days of the Yamato, but these retellings gained a special significance in the geopolitically isolated and superstitious Edo period of the lush, battle-scarred island. However, none of the locals could ever have guessed that the tales and monsters of the Edo age could manifest into reality, giving rise to not just one demon, but dozens. At least, as far as they were concerned. All of their stories and teachings had been passed down for generations, meaning they had come from somewhere concrete. After all, there is no smoke without fire, and no cobwebs without spiders to spin them.

Deep beneath the Earth, in their final refuge from those who would see them extinct, there dwelt the last of the great species *Arachno gigas*, the largest spiders in existence. Their evolutionary history was completely unknown, and their capabilities were even more nebulous. Not that the locals regarded them as anything other than monstrous demons, driving them to near extinction in the ancient Emishi days of the 300’s BCE. Though, even as the people were convinced of their own success, the spiders managed to cling onto the last strand of silk that they could spin, a large network of underground passages, cloaked with delicately threaded tapestries of webs. And for centuries, the arachnids hid away in their tunnels, remaining unseen, then passing into legend. Unfortunately, those legends had painted them as malicious depravations, lighting them as all that they were not. For they never once had taken a human as prey, preferring instead to catch those that they found more manageable to cocoon and liquify, such as deer or pigs. Thus, the grievances the locals had with these spiders were not out of fear for themselves, but for their livestock, for humanity seldom tolerates another hunter as prolific as they. And so, the Japanese branded them demons and sought their destruction.

-

This holocaust subsided once the spiders had disappeared below ground, the humans assuming then that they had all been killed. That was until one evening in 1735, when a child and

his father saw fit to chase after their enthusiastic canine companion, who had seemingly fallen into the relentless tangle of a great spider's web.

The child tore his way through the forest, out of breath as he ran, tears streaming from his trauma-stricken eyes. He collapsed onto his knees as soon as he reached his village, informing his community that his dog and his father had become food for a massive spider. Prodded by fear, the villagers went to their Daimyo, relaying the message to him and his contingent of samurai warriors. Abducted by his rage, the Daimyo called his armies and villagers to finally eradicate what he realized were the last remnants of the spiders, branded enemies, once and for all.

--

Torches in their hands, the mob sallied out to the location of the nest, as told by the little boy whose father and dog were reportedly killed by the spiders within. When they arrived, the arachnids were sleeping soundly in their silk beds, never knowing what was about to happen.

-

Despite the fury of the mob however, their boy heralder of danger had not been entirely truthful, for the child had merely panicked at the sight of a lone spider, abandoning his father and his dog. After hours of calling for his son, the father ran afoul of a band of former samurai raiders who were encamped in the forest, ambushing passersby as a means of eeking out a living from their inglorious present, using the skills they'd gleaned from their warrior past. They eviscerated the man and decapitated his dog, placing the former's head on a spike outside their campsite. But the mob knew this not, being irrevocably convinced of the arachnids' guilt, or at the very least, their culpability. And so, the nest was torched into a heap of ash and blackened corpses. Never once did the mob reconsider or even question their decision to wipe out an entire species, all because a little boy knew nothing but fear.

But unbeknownst to the mob, as they returned to their village, their revenge would come at a cost. The phantom of their fire was ash and smoke. And from the dead spiders in their grey silkened tombs, there manifested what the Japanese called a kami, a spirit that interacted with mankind, though not always in the most merciful of ways. And as the locals would eventually come to learn, centuries later, this particular kami would help make the others look like so much ash and dust in the storm of her rage, for confined as she was to her place of birth, she would never show what her brethren had been denied. Henceforth, she was called, by the residents of Iwate, Kumo Hai, the Ash Spider of the Forest. And there she dwelt in her forbidden cave, where it was said that the ghost of the great spiders would have her revenge upon any human whose ignorance would lead them to tread upon the graves dug by their ancestors.

---Mythos-A Dark Rebirth---

“Matter cannot be created nor destroyed in any chemical reaction”

-The Law of the Conservation of Mass

The Boston Crater was like a rearing maw, waiting to swallow the ocean. None were permitted to tread there, to cross the lines of arbitration without proper clearance. However, a small team of scientists had worked tirelessly to acquire this very pair of scissors to cut the delicate ribbon of entry. And after a year of persuasion, they were granted a total of 8 months to conduct their permitted experiments, in order to determine the full extent of atomic damage done there by the short-lived android known only in government files as Blackheart, and the incident to which his name was ascribed. In order to test the level of damage, the team would recharge the atoms left over by Blackheart’s death. As matter could not be created or destroyed, they thought that introducing electromagnetic energy to the various pockets of Blackheart’s remaining particles would reveal their magnitude. The energy present within them could also potentially be harnessed for humanity’s use. To do this, the scientists constructed a large apparatus over the entire crater, appearing as a ring around its perimeter, then a massive arch spanning its diameter. Through these lines, charged particles, similar to the ones present in what they had determined to be within at least some of Blackheart’s makeup, would be sent, the apparatus drawing from their energy, then sparking bolts of electricity into the crater, thereby stimulating these atomic remnants, resulting in their supposed detection and analysis. No officials or researchers involved would have ever assumed that doing this would result in something far more than any of them had bargained for, something far more deadly.

--

With the flip of a switch, the particles were shot through the lines around the crater. In mere seconds, they made contact with one another again and again until enough of their kinetic energy was chipped away that it was of a volume suitable for harvestability. Soon, blue streaks of lightning drew forth from the lines at every angle, reacting with the so-christened Blackheart particles strewn about the crater. However, rather than reveal their presence, the immense level of energy catalyzed another reaction within them, one that tore a hole in space and time, essentially reactivating the black hole that gave the android life. A pitch cloud suddenly materialized in the center of the crater, a rough figure that coalesced into the shape of a humanoid shadow, enveloping the reformed singularity in an anthropoid light. And from the abyss of reality, came the spectre of Blackheart, all but formless, dark, and hungry. However, his atomic structure was inherently unstable, a constant threat hanging over him. As a result, Blackheart required a constant intake of matter to sustain his existence, but too much would cause him to overload and atomize, thereby compelling him to consistently shed matter from his being, sloughing it off like a snake perpetually shedding its skin. He was living hunger, the

ultimate wendigo. One who could never cease consumption. All of this occurred within a fraction of a second, giving the researchers no time to react before they were spaghettified into Blackheart's very being, them and all of the equipment used to resurrect the epitome of a bottomless well, a black hole that could never be filled, by anything or anyone. As the bodies vanished, Blackheart surveyed his surroundings, reconstituting his form into something resembling his previous body. However, unable to become wholly solid, he was only able to distinguish himself slightly from the abyssal wound in spacetime that he had become, appearing almost wraithlike, aetherial, black, and cloaked in the darkness of ultimate space. Looking northwestward, Blackheart began to float towards the cold forests of Canada, his essence inhaling everything before and behind him. He was the one who consumed all, one who could never be satisfied. He would always be a bleeding wound in the world, attempting to heal, in vain.

---To Crawl Upon the Land and Swim Beneath the Water---

Rotating his round pectoral fins, Bullseye waited patiently for his opening. The local crocodile was gone for the time being, giving Bullseye the opportunity to reach the surface of his stagnant pond to breathe. Odd for a fish, but Bullseye was a specialist, a fish who could live and move anywhere. He'd attempted this latter tribulation before, but had been scared back into his pond by the crocodile, with whom he shared the small Tamil water hole. Beating his tail back and forth as rapidly as he could, Bullseye found the air above just in time to slink back down into his hiding place before the reptile lumbered into the water. Inconvenienced by this scaly goliath for far too long, Bullseye vowed that the next time his nemesis left, he would crawl his way out of this glorified puddle and find a proper canal of his own, one in which he could crawl upon the land and swim beneath the water to his little heart's content.

--

The following day, when the crocodile left, Bullseye made his move. Swimming to shore, he used his pectoral fins to hoist himself out of the water, gulping as much air as he could before his journey towards a long canal that he had spied whence he'd last tried to escape. It was just ahead of him, not 200 feet beyond the lip upon which he was currently perched. Summoning all of his strength, he dragged himself up and over the crest of the muddy bank of the pond, plopping himself into the grass for the first time in a long time. Inhaling another talent of air, Bullseye rotated his fins and pulled himself forward, using every muscle in his body to inch his way to the canal, which was diminishing ever more in distance from the fish's flailing form. But before he got any closer, he detected the thundering vibrations of his reptilian nemesis, in the ripples of his lateral line, following close behind him. Panicking, Bullseye thrashed his tail and flipped his fins, faster than he ever had before. All the while, the crocodile pursued him in a high walk, zeroing in on the tantalizing morsel waving its tail in front of him like a worm on a hook. Bullseye had no choice this time, he had to keep going.

-

The crocodile was nearly upon him, but Bullseye was only 3 finstrokes away from his canal. He could feel the breath of his nemesis on his back as he gave a final push with his fins and finally threw himself forward, diving cleanly into the water of the canal, followed by the crocodile.

-

The reptile resurfaced shortly thereafter, having failed to secure his prey. The little snakehead had slipped from his jaws just before they could close, escaping into the weedy murk beyond their reach. Bullseye swam for his life until he needed another gulp of air, taking his first breath in uncharted waters. Descending to the bottom, after all that he had spent to get there, Bullseye folded his fins, calmed himself, and fell asleep, allowing himself to finally relax and feel free, truly, for the first time in his life.

---Sea Ribbons---

Hiding cozily between the coral crags of the ocean, their mouths gape as their tails slither, their eyes as piercing as they are innocent, only searching for what their bodies need, catching their food with their dual sets of jaws, one being visible, and the other set deep within their throats, extending outward to grasp their hapless prey once skewered upon their jagged foremost teeth. Most apes find them unsettling, but not me. They are my favorite animals of the ocean. Some call them morays, I call them beautiful.

---Mythos-Omnipotence Challenged---

“What is man? He's just a collection of chemicals with delusions of grandeur.”

-Ayn Rand-Atlas Shrugged

Yahweh’s decree of extermination had already left thousands of rattlesnakes dead within just 14 hours. Ryu was still crossing The Pacific Ocean, so Yahweh had some time to kill. Time he spent merely sitting and waiting for his strategy to bear fruit.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, Ramsay the Ghost was discovering the presence of an increasing number of abilities at his disposal, the cause of which continued to elude him. The first was the option to project an arsenal of tendrils from his poncho. Taking the form of metallic skeletal serpents flanked by blades on both sides of their thin, winding bodies, they granted him the power to slash entire groups of people to ribbons, the living weapons often biting into the victims on their own accord with their razor-like teeth. Not long after this, he became familiar with a second ability, telekinesis. This was revealed to him in a fight with multiple armored vehicles driven by members of America’s military. Ramsay’s snake tendrils affected the tank armor not, aside from scratching it, leaving him to experiment with this latest metaphysical power, levitating the treaded vehicles into the air without touching them, letting them hover in place before thrusting them upward, allowing gravity to finish the job, killing the occupants inside.

Back in Sweetwater, Yahweh was starting to think that his strategy was not panning out, due to an increase in the deaths of his worshippers. Still not understanding why this was happening, and remaining convinced of Ryu’s guilt, Yahweh resolved to ramp up the slaughter by making direct contact with the highest authority in the land, something he’d never done before. Taking himself to Washington DC, the deity appeared to the president of The United States, himself. The man was at first alarmed, but calmed when Yahweh revealed his identity. The president, a devout Christian, asked his god what he required, and was met with a somewhat surprising response, to order an official eradication campaign of rattlesnakes, as they were fueling the strength of, what Yahweh called, the enemy. The President was slightly taken aback, but holding no love for snakes, he went ahead with the decree and gave the order to all citizens of his country, to wipe out the venomous reptiles.

This was not met with gladness by some however, leading to minute protests in the capital, gatherings that were annihilated by Yahweh's lightning, who would tolerate no such sedition in "his great kingdom on Earth". Though, most people gladly did as their god and country had instructed and had taken to slaying every serpent that came near to their hovels.

In the south, Ramsay was feeling constant pangs of pain and jolts of energy, resulting in thousands of massacres of humans coinciding with those of rattlesnakes, The Ghost disappearing and reappearing in different places, constantly bathing them in blood before abruptly vanishing when all of his enemies were dead and in pieces. But with this latest turn of events, even Ramsay knew that this state of affairs could not continue, and so required a much larger apparatus to repay the deaths that he'd realized were fueling him in a way that he had yet to understand. And so, he decided to go to the one place from which he could exact his toll, the American nation's capital.

Yahweh and The President had become convinced of the same thing when the murders only escalated in congruence with their increasing violence towards rattlesnakes. Thinking that he was in danger from whatever was killing his people, The President took it upon himself to board his plane and escape. Yahweh joined him in the sky when the plane disembarked, just as Ramsay the Ghost burst into the oval office, slaughtering the entire White House staff before they could even blink. The Ghost then made his way outside to the back lawn, looked to the sky, and spied the takeoff of Air Force One. Reaching out to it with his open hand, the plane jolted into suspension, being held back from below. Ramsay then drew his arm to his side, and gradually curled his fingers inward, dragging the plane down from the air, and forcing it to crash into the grass in front of him. He subsequently ripped a hole in the fuselage with his bladed tendrils and hauled The President out of the aircraft. Yahweh suddenly appeared before Ramsay, who was clutching his victim in mid-air, and shot forth a bolt of lightning at the hatted stranger. But instead of damaging Ramsay, the bolt dissipated on contact with him, being dispersed in all directions by his tendrils, the metal structures acting as lightning rods. The Ghost then stared at Yahweh with utter contempt, locking eyes with this unfamiliar entity as he callously threw a knife into The President's throat, slashing through his arteries, and draining blood from his head until it developed a pallid complexion. The Ghost tossed the man aside like a discarded piece of meat and sized up his enemy, almost daring Yahweh to attack him again. However, the deity felt something that he'd never felt before, his heart began to pound furiously and his breath quickened. Ramsay noticed this and gave a malicious grin beneath his mask, then asked Yahweh who he was. Yahweh responded by shakily attempting to intimidate and impress The Ghost by announcing that he was "the lord, thy god" and that he should bow before his greatness. Ramsay raised an eyebrow as he looked Yahweh up and down, before stating that a god could never have been brought to the Earth by one who was not his equal. So why shouldn't he be considered a god, himself? Yahweh responded with his characteristic narcissism, claiming that there were no other "gods" before him. Ramsay then asked him that, if

he was so powerful, then why was he afraid? Yahweh shuttered, and Ramsay saw it, the so-called deity knew fear, but from whom? Ramsay then thought a while before piecing together his own jigsaw puzzle, with every dead rattlesnake, he had grown in lethality to counterbalance them with more dead people, eventually granting him an uptick in his abilities and raw power to match the uptick in violence against serpents. Realizing the implications of this, he sardonically said that many of his kills had been worshippers of a deity named Yahweh, then inquired if he knew of a “creature” by that name. Yahweh responded to the question with arrogance, as if bandaging his wounded pride, revealing that he was, in fact, Yahweh, the one true god, and the one to “put the serpents in their place”. Ramsay felt a sudden surge of rage within him and threw his snake tendrils in Yahweh's direction, striking the entity multiple times, the serpents clamping down on the god as they struck him, their master tearing them free from Yahweh’s body, causing the latter to fall in pain and bleed profusely. Feeling genuine physical hurt for the first time in his existence, Yahweh did something that he had never done before, he ran for his life, ducking behind the walls of The White House as Ramsay’s tendrils pursued him, striking him repeatedly like the vengeful snakes they represented. Each mouth that missed its mark chipped off pieces of The White House’s exterior marble, letting the crumbling columns fall onto Yahweh’s head, signalling that the god had met his match. But just before he fled, Yahweh heard Ramsay shout the words, *I will find you, and I will butcher you like livestock! I will take this entire country from beneath the feet of its people, and when I do, I will be the one they call god!* Yahweh then took himself all the way back to Sweetwater’s ruins, collapsing in a panic.

--

With Ramsay confined to The United States, as gathered by virtue of him not appearing in any other part of the world, despite all evidence that he would if he could, Yahweh decided to travel again, this time beyond the Mexican border, just out of Ramsay’s reach. But it was in hiding that he would be forced to reconsider his role as a god, where his deeds would be laid bare, and where his sins would be punished, and where he would learn that only one thing could offer him an escape.

---Little Bear Traps---

They were devastated and angry when the giant pillars of flesh came down upon their nests, structures that they had not only worked on for months, but more importantly, housed their eggs. Subsequently, the little bear traps were sprung, forcing the humans to flee from the waters of the Amazon, their feet covered in inch-wide bites from the small but mighty piranhas, upon whose nests their clumsy feet had trod, convinced that this world was their own.

---Mythos-The Created and The Spider---

News of the incident in Washington DC spread like the fire of Air Force One's burning metal hull, along with the international circuit reporting on the destruction of The-Cave-by-the-Sea, home of Ryu the Great Python, whose existence had been also revealed to the public, placing yet more targets on the serpent's back.

--

In a Nebraskan bar, not far from her hometown, Camilla the Created sat in shock and ponderance. It had become very evident that Ramsay was far too dangerous for her to approach directly, but the home of a giant python, she thought, must have some clues as to where she could go to get her revenge. After all, most Americans who worshipped Yahweh had been commanded to kill rattlesnakes, resulting in The Ghost adding those people to his mountains of corpses. So Camilla thought that a uniquely large serpent was in some way either responsible for The Ghost, or was knowledgeable of what might make him vulnerable. And so, she packed her things from her former home and set off to Japan, where Ryu's cave had been located.

However, realizing that she did not possess a valid passport, and unsure if she would even be eligible for one, given her lack of a birth certificate, the thought of a rather creative and deceptive strategy slipped its way into Camilla's mind. Aware of the potency of her looks, she dressed herself as provocatively as possible and made her way to Chicago in the hopes of someone with financial significance taking to her appearance, someone with access to alternative private forms of transportation, possibly a jet or boat, that could carry her to where she wanted to go. Carefully and tactfully, Camilla posed as a fresh immigrant from some poorer country just waiting for "the man of her dreams" to whisk her away to the country that she had always wished to go to, Japan. And after several days of charm and manipulation, Camilla had gotten her wish.

After 32 hours in a private jet and some lessons in Japanese, Camilla and her wealthy escort touched down in Okinawa. Once confident that she would not be followed, the former then slipped away from her escort to the location of Ryu's former cave. According to the locals she managed to speak with, the cave had been destroyed, but its remnants could still be found, far to the south, in a remote corner of the Ryukyu island chain, northeast of Taiwan. With the locale she needed, Camilla gradually found her way to what was left of The-Cave-by-the-Sea. But once there, she found nothing to indicate a direct link to Ramsay. The area had been reduced to a watery pile of rubble, holding little resemblance to the home of The Great Python that it had been for centuries. However, what this did show was that there was no reason to believe that

Ryu, himself, could have been responsible for Ramsay's actions. However, it also meant that Camilla was, once again, at a dead end. And with her escort likely long gone at this point, she had no alternative but to remain in Japan for the time being.

--

On her way back north though, she heard about another potential avenue for revenge, a creature by the name of Jorogumo, the spider spirit of Japan, that a resident had, allegedly, sighted in Iwate prefecture. Though she might at first be tempted to dismiss this as fantasy, she remembered that a giant python had been chased from Japan by a godlike being for the deeds of another powerful entity that had become his greatest rival. If all of that could happen, what was one more supernatural creature? With this in mind, Camilla made her way north to the other side of the country, in the hopes of finding something that may give her insight and power. Power enough, perhaps, to challenge The Ghost.

Iwate was more remote than she had anticipated, and its people were even more tight-lipped regarding the fabled spider spirit. With the locals refusal to speak, likely out of fear, Camilla became relegated to combing the vast forest for any hints at all of Jorogumo. And it was there that she came to an area that appeared to have once been another cave. It looked to be completely devoid of life, until Camilla smelled the faint stench of ash waft passed her curling nose. She then bore witness to a phantasmic presence that materialized before her, taking the form of a massive spider, the likes of which Camilla had never seen before. She was even more mystified when it began to speak to her, demanding to know why a creature like her had dared tread upon the graves of her loved ones, her extinct brethren. Camilla found that this spirit could understand her as well, as she responded by asking what the spider meant by "a creature like her". The spider laughed and remarked that the woman did not even know what she was, the truth of which the spider could sense, her intuition acting as the threads of a web splayed out beneath her legs, able to detect the faintest traces of truth and intention around her. The spider then introduced herself as Kumo Hai, the Ashen Arachnid, the last remnant of her species, all of whom were wiped out long ago by the Iwate. Camilla then asked about her prime target, Ramsay the Ghost of the United States. However, Kumo Hai admitted that she held no knowledge of this entity, as her focus lay upon her species' killers, alone. The spider then asked Camilla about an existent the former did know, a spirit known as Shuk'De'Caull, and remarked that she had never before heard of him creating someone as beautiful as her. Camilla took a step backward and nervously asked who Shuk'De'Caull was. Kumo Hai spun a silky yarn, with a slight chuckle, telling her guest of The Black Spirit of Hope. She disclosed that the being was brought into existence by living things, just like all supernatural entities on Earth, fueled either by positive or negative forces, whether tangible or amorphous. Shuk'De'Caull was no exception, being brought into the world not long ago, here, in Japan. However, Kumo Hai continued by adding that despite his place of birth, Shuk'De'Caull's influence was not limited to these islands, for the source of his power was as widespread as the people who prayed to him, people known worldwide for their insecurities and perversions. Kumo Hai then diverged slightly, mentioning a

ring, apparently owned by the entity, but claimed that it had been lost long ago. Most likely however, the trinket had never existed at all, merely being a way to describe Shuk'De'Caull's hold on those who invoked him, referring to it as "The Ring of Hope", an emotion that the entity preyed upon by feeding it to those within whom hope had been made false, capitalizing on their desperation by offering them a way out of their loneliness and social ineptitude. With their egos guiding their minds, those with knowledge of The Black Spirit of Hope contacted him with profane rituals, including one to create, for their enjoyment, their very own bride, from the skull of a dead woman and a volume of their own blood. Camilla rapidly began to connect her thumbtacks and strings, her lover, her lack of memories prior to him, and the grave she had found of a woman bearing her name. A grave that had been robbed of only one thing, a skull. Camilla dropped to the ground in shock, attempting to catch her breath in a panic attack. Kumo Hai remained calm however, telling the woman to get up, and then asked her what had happened to her creator. Still shaking uncontrollably, Camilla trembled out that his name was Toby, and that he'd been killed by her target, Ramsay the Ghost, and added that she had come here in the hopes of finding a way to avenge his death. Kumo Hai then asked if this was something that she still desired to do. Tremulating to a stiller quiver, Camilla said no, not after what she had just learned, confronting herself aloud that she now resented the man for what he had done, desecrating a grave for a whiff of affection from someone who wasn't even human. Kumo Hai smiled if a spider could smile, and slyly told Camilla that she could give her the power and knowledge to avenge, but advised her to inflict that vendetta upon those who had done her wrong, and not upon the one one who had, in a sense, freed her from a lifetime of servitude. Her shaking slowly ceased, her muscles cascading into relaxation as Camilla was overcome by a sense of calm, followed by a sense of power that coursed through her body, the spider's words resonating with someone who saw no further purpose in life. She stood up, faced Kumo Hai, and asked to learn from the spider, to know how to be powerful, free, and independent of other beings. The arachnoid kami grinned again, nodded, if a spider could nod, and led Camilla into her ruined caves, where she proclaimed to her new apprentice that she would teach her how to command the likes of those who had been foolish enough to create someone as powerful as her.

The 2 sat quietly, facing one another in a larger chamber of the dead silk tombs, within which Kumo Hai began informing her pupil of her true nature, as far as she understood it. The spider unveiled that Camilla was a supernatural entity sustained by Shuk'De'Caull, something known as a "De'Caull doll", referred to as such for reasons that Camilla needed not explained to her. However, despite her intended role as a sex-object, she did retain supernatural abilities of her own, an inevitable consequence of her otherworldly composition. Camilla asked how the spider knew all of this, to which Kumo Hai said that she possessed a "web of information", something that was attached to all of the people who had been descended from those who had killed her kind, the giant Japanese spiders of Iwate, a product of her own creation. However, even though she could identify her enemies, she could not kill them, being confined to this area of forest, due to it being from where she derived her power and the proverbial fuel line for her very existence, the graves of her dead kin. Kumo Hai then delivered Camilla an offer, that if she would teach her

how to use her inborn gifts from Shuk'De'Caull, then she would use them to kill the targets within her mind's web. Kumo Hai would then work with her to concoct a stratagem for her own agenda, after all of the spider's targets had been eliminated. Without much in the way of an alternative, and given the volume of truth that she had already learned, Camilla agreed without hesitation. And so began her tutelage under the Ashen Spider.

---Mythos-Become Death---

"The Blessed Lord said: I am Time, destroyer of worlds, and I have come to engage all people. With the exception of you, all the soldiers here on both sides will be slain."

-The Bhagavad Gita

With Yahweh gone from America, Ramsay faced no challengers. The old god had fled in terror, leaving the apex predator to reign supreme. He began with those who thought themselves untouchable, those residing within the marbled walls of Congress. Bursting into The Senate, Ramsay extended his serpent tendrils into the room, severing limbs, ripping torsos, and tearing heads from necks, often taking sections of vertebrae with them. The Capitol Building became drenched in blood, constellated with the viscera and bone of those who once ruled the land. Ramsay walked through the carpeted corridors, slaughtering every human in his path, regardless of their ophidiocidal guilt, as his priorities had shifted from individuals who killed snakes, to an entire nation that killed them. As long as humanity continued with its own strain of mass murder, Ramsay's bloodthirst remained unquenchable.

--

Next was his attack on The Pentagon, where countless employees met the same grisly fates of those in The White House and The Capitol, their organs becoming decorum for all rooms of the United States' right arm. An arm that was severed, coating the ground where it fell in the blood of those inside. Despite this however, the citizenry waivered not in their slaughter of serpents, as they valued the word of their own god over the threats of the one who sought to replace him, much to Ramsay's frustration. Therefore, he took an alternate approach, and again made his way to The Capitol Building, to claim the mantle of king.

Hours later, The Capitol was surrounded by a throng of military vehicles, both grounded and arial, ready to annihilate anything and everything in their path if it meant the death of The Ghost, who promptly reached out with his hand and closed his fist as soon as he spied his enemies

lurking beyond the walls. Outside, every single vehicle and soldier was pulled into the pillared building, sending fire, shrapnel, and flesh into the marble promenade, wiping out the entire legion in a single stroke. Any who survived this initial strike were detected by Ramsay as he emerged from the wreckage, and were swiftly and brutally dispatched with blade and bullet. Following this, and wishing to avoid more casualties, the military officials spared by The Ghost did as the entity commanded when they showed themselves, and knelt before him, calling Ramsay the King of the United States of America, if he would but spare their lives. Ramsay nodded, then commanded them to go forth and kill any and all who had disobeyed his decrees to not harm rattlesnakes, and to usurp control of each individual state from its elected governor, deferring dominion of the land directly to him. With little other choice, the officers agreed, and did as Ramsay ordered. And as the military dispersed, he noted the human remains strewn about the ruined building, collected the most “suitable” specimens of bone and sinew, and fashioned them into a crude crown that he then placed around his hat in a sort of band, much like those who did the same with the skin and teeth of alligators and snakes, as if to parody those whom he hated most. Climbing the hill of rubble, Ramsay then dragged from it a large office chair, which was mostly intact, and sat upon it, crowning the pile of marble, like a conqueror perched atop his hoard.

--

The killing commenced almost as soon as The Ghost was enthroned in DC. The military was violently purged of anyone who displayed a little too much defiance for their king’s liking, then the surviving soldiers moved on the governors, all of whom were brought before Ramsay in armored vans and presented as offerings of allegiance by those who feared most their king. Satisfied with these captives, he had the former state governors crucified along The National Mall, from the ruins of The Capitol Building to The Lincoln Memorial. He then culled the citizenry, beginning with those of prominence, celebrities, billionaires, religious leaders, megachurch charlatans, and countless others on Ramsay’s hit list were rounded up and decapitated en masse, their heads placed on spikes and planted about the entire country, signalling to everyone the penalty for existing where the king would rather they not.

Far away from America, Yahweh wandered the streets of Mexico City, fearing to face the only monster to chase him from a fight. As he walked past the excavation site of what were once the temples of Tenochtitlan, he heard a collective cry of fear and rage from a walkway just beyond his sight. The voices cried out in Spanish, *Snake! Kill it, before it eats someone!* Yahweh thought it odd that a snake should be regarded as large enough to consume a person, but soon realized what it meant. Yahweh then turned and looked in the commotion’s direction, only to see Ryu lying about as he was attacked by a gang of locals. The god was paralyzed, not knowing what to do. Ryu then flung the mob from his back and slithered into the area where Yahweh lingered. After months of swimming through a vast ocean that had thrown him off-course and cast him upon the beaches of Mexico, Yahweh’s was the last face he thought that he would see. In fact, the reason he went inland at all was in the hopes of finding some other place to rest, thinking that

Mexico’s history of serpent worship would mean a safe haven, not having been there before, but learning of it through his Cave-by-the-Sea grapevine. But he was dismayed to find that they had long taken to worshipping the one who’d cursed him, and seeing his tormentor, The Great Python seethed. However, he decided to approach him, noticing the look of fear and indecisiveness plastered upon the deity’s complexion. The snake slinked up to him, making Yahweh even more uncomfortable, and with an underlying sense of contempt, but an epipelagic sense of curiosity, Ryu asked Yahweh with a flicker of his forked tongue, *What happened to you?*

---The Watcher---

Solitude, the prison of invulnerability. Immune to pain, yet banished from connection. Never to lose, yet never to love. A paradox faced by The Watcher, a man no more. An immortal being, ageless and invincible, qualities that only a god could possess. But to gain these privileges, he was made to pay a steep price, to become locked in another world, beyond human contact. A world accessible to him, alone. Upon his entrance, his appearance shifted from a gaunt young man to a scaled creature, whose visage was that of a dragon, and whose wings could carry him nowhere. Within his tiny world, he was granted another ability, that of omniscience, a sapient surveyor that could see the world through the eyes of any whom he wished at any moment he chose, all unknown to his proximal lens. Yet, only could he watch, never to feel anything that he saw from their eyes. He could merely imagine the feelings of his living cameras. Fear, love, pain, and compassion. All of these he could view, but not experience. He could not communicate with those he saw, though he could hear them, conversations that he was privy to, but could never hope to become a part of. And so, The Watcher did as he was bid, and became the all-seeing dragon, living in a world apart. This is what he saw…

His first choice of lens was a young man, not unlike the one whom he previously had been. His name was Caleb, an 18 year old high school graduate bent on becoming a first-rate bioengineer. However, this was not to be, for his trajectory was derailed by another, one with whom he was infatuated. With black iridescent hair and the face of a porcelain angel, the young woman guided him into her life, and from there, he became a permanent fixture, siring no less than 4 children with her, all of whom bore his last name. He died of a stroke at age 74.

His second choice was that of a traveller. His name was Anton. Hailing from a largely obscure region of the southeastern United States, he'd long dreamt of a life beyond borders. And so, with all of the money he could gather, he left his place of birth and began a worldwide journey, beginning in Mexico, where Chichen Itza glistened in the sun that its constructors had worshipped for millenia. He then took a plane to The United Kingdom, where he gazed upon the obelisks of Stonehenge. He subsequently travelled to China, where The Great Wall and greater food kept him for over 4 years. Lastly, he went to Iraq, believing that it had become a safer place, and wishing to go where few others had dared to tread. His plane crashed into the Persian desert, killing him in a fiery metal shell at age 35.

His third choice was a king, a ruler who wielded his unchecked power with abandon. His name was Vladimir. He had been spawned into poverty, but ruthlessly clawed his way into the hallowed halls of absolute dominion. His murderous flamboyancies involved torture and rape,

leaving shattered human bodies and minds in his blood-soaked wake. But eventually, his subjects' fear became anger, and he was overthrown and killed, hacked to pieces by the mob, his mangled body being burned in the back of a wagon at age 43.

The Watcher pulled himself from his observances and was overcome with a desire to live. Live a life that he wanted before he, too, was no more. *How could one live in a box, merely watching lives, rather than living one's own?* He thought. And so, he pleaded with his benefactor of omniscience for permission to do just that, live. The walls opened, and out stepped The Watcher into the world. No longer was he scaled, for he had returned to his humanoid form, unaged and unaltered. But as he looked around at the world he had returned to, he felt as though something was missing, some spark of life had gone out, as if he'd been gutted, and left empty. He was completely changed within, unlike his static surface. As he walked the streets of his world, he felt nothing, no awe, no curiosity, and no surprise. He'd seen it all already through the eyes of others, and was so intimately familiar with every bit of his surroundings that he was devoid of excitement, and his wonderment had abandoned his mind. It was as though he was already dead on the inside, having lived a life outside of the world that he had previously wanted to be a part of, but now wanted to leave. And so, he returned to the other world, making the bargain once more, and again becoming The Watcher, the scaled dragon who had witnessed it all, yet had never lived a moment of it.

---The Cold---

My hand to my chin, stroking my mask with an iron-clawed glove, I stare down from my mountain, my body cloaked in black, and my mountain in white, shrouding my being from all eyes below. Between the cold steel and frigid snow, the cold is all I feel, both within and without. The mountains enfencing the valley before me keep those people within their borders, but I know that they could never understand such isolation and excommunication, for I am the only one to see them as they truly are, a speck on my map, a fleeting batch of wood and flesh that could become undone at the slightest cry in the mountains, triggering a wall of frozen water that will smother all life in its unstoppable path. If I were to do such a thing, I would be a god, deciding the fates of thousands from above where I can cast judgement upon those who cast me from their lives, forcing me to go one direction, upward, climbing to the very dizzying heights of this small world, a word I can only use to describe it, as I see it from the highest of peaks. I know more than they who spat me out, I see more, I am more. And yet, as I consider the options that only a god could consider, I hesitate, for if death was brought to all, then I would hold dominion and impression over no one. I would be alone, my body freezing at the top of my mountain, a jagged tooth of the Earth from which I may as well cast myself, should those below be gone, for a god is worthless without people to revere him, hate him, or fear him. They did not need me

below, so why do I find myself needing them from above? A dilemma to be sure, and one that I have yet to reconcile.

---The Language of Humanity---

One inescapable truth of humanity in relation to the natural world is a pattern of violence. So then, why do environmental groups lean into eschewing this most critical of human traits? Self-righteousness? Perhaps. But what lesson does this teach?

-

In Dr. Suess' The Lorax, the titular character uses diplomacy and protest, attempting to convince his nemesis, The Once-ler, to cease his destruction of the forest, and The Lorax lost. If the latter had truly wished to save the world, I advocate that he should have cut The Once-ler's throat the second the antagonist downed that first tree, for if he had, then the other trees may well still be alive. See, if humanity only knows violence, the main tool with which it interacts with other living things, the proverbial language with which it speaks, then why not communicate to them in a language that they understand? For if humanity only understands violence, and those opposed to them only attempt to say "no", then it only bears resemblance to The Lorax attempting to do so to The Once-ler in Geisel's story. The Lorax spoke in his own language, the language of ahimsa, and The Lorax lost. But the truth is, he did not have to. For if one does not speak your language, then speak to them in theirs, and only then will your voice be understood.

---Mythos-The Grand Army---

Kinoko Watabe shut the door to his small apartment in Kyoto, Japan, collapsing on his frameless mattress after a 10-hour shift at his office in the city. But just before his eyes drifted shut for the night, a knock came from outside. Curious, Kinoko forced himself from his mattress and made his way to the door. And when he slid it open, there stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, a woman that left him hanging from the ceiling by his neck, broken with his own belt, the rest of him untouched. Sliding the door shut, Camilla walked leisurely down the hall, crossing the first name off of her mentor's list of targets.

-

Kumo Hai had 5 more names to scratch out, spread across Japan, all male, all spouseless. And fortunately, for her, none had thought to reside overseas. And as Camilla killed, the spider spoke, for with each strand of her mind's web that was cut by her pupil's knife, there was eliminated another of her enemies, and so she needed not to be presented with that which she had already borne witness to. And so, Camilla wavered not as her mentor's lessons circumambulated about in her own neural network, woven threads of her own thought that were rapidly lengthening with every lecture and every kill. Learning from her master how to spin a web of lies and enticing propositions, a beautiful silken tapestry that belied her malintentions, a sticky net to trap the least capable of both flies and men. Kumo Hai provided the names, Camilla provided the rest, and together, The Created and The Spider were, for all intents and purposes, Jorogumo, the killer arachnid who posed as a potential lover before the backdrop of a curtain of falling water, like the hair of an angel cast over the shoulders of the Earth, only for those who wanted her to fall and become enraptured in her white threads of death. And one by one, they all fell, and Camilla found herself invigorated in every last one. It was as if she were cleaning up the garbage that polluted humanity's social streets. Avenging a true victim of ignorance and fear didn't hurt either.

-

The target that followed Camilla's first kill fought as much as his predecessor had. She handcuffed him to his bed and strangled him to death with another belt.

-

These people, these men, she thought, *They want only to control me,* thinking as she bit her tongue before the enamored eyes of her next target, Yashi Nogonama, whom she took to bed, dominated, and smothered to death with the pillow she pulled out from behind his head as she leaned over his naked body.

-

They want to enslave me, for me to become their property, she said to herself as she tied the next one to a chair as she guided their roleplay into barbarity with Manake Idonama's successive beating to death with first a plastic paddle, then a telescopic baton, and finally, a bloodsoaked steel chain with a padlock affixed to its end.

-

Just like Toby. They're all like Toby. They're all depraved, she took the next one into the shower, *disgusting,* she grabbed his head, *vile men,* she threw his head into the tile wall repeatedly, *who care for nothing but sex,* his skull cracked open like an egg, spilling its brainy yolk into the drain as the water washed away the viscera.

-

So, sex I will give them, she internally declared as she bent the last one over his couch before drawing forth a stimulating electric prod, wired to a car battery, *and the desecration that comes with it.* She left Utateo Anganai penetrated and fried from the inside-out.

--

Kumo Hai was at once marveled and wary of her apprentice, for The Created seemed to take a disproportionate amount of pleasure from killing her targets, for as much as the spider wished them dead, their suffering was not on her agenda, for she remained, after all this time, a simple spider, wishing only to inflict justice, not pain. Justice needed not be so sadistically carried out, so lamented the spider, but Camilla had her own ideas about what punishment was, no doubt, as Kumo Hai suspected, due to her nature, being a creation of Shuk'De'Caull, whom, it must be said, frightened Kumo Hai from the very first realization of what he truly was, a whisper of something far more sinister, said from the mouth of the most beautiful woman in the world. But in the end, it didn't truly matter. Kumo Hai would get what she wanted, and so would Camilla.

--

As The Created stepped back into Kumo Hai's cave, the spider congratulated Camilla for her victory. However, because of their success, Kumo Hai then revealed one final truth to her protege, that the former was to fade from existence, as there was no further fuel to her fire, in other words, her mission had been accomplished, rendering her obsolete. Camilla was stunned, thinking that supernatural entities were permanent fixtures in the world, but was corrected by the spider, who explained that once a spirit's "fuel" has run dry, that spirit will fracture from reality, and that this phenomenon was not limited to her, as every single entity had been brought into the world via external forces, living things that wished to see a change, a force so powerful that they shifted reality, itself, giving birth to an agent to complete the task, whether that was revenge, protection, or compensation. All fire requires fuel, and once it's spent, the fire will die, said the spider. Camilla then asked one last question, *Are you sure that my blood will be enough?* Before she faded away, the Ashen Spider stated that, yes, it would be more than enough for what The

Created wanted to accomplish. Kumo Hai said her farewells and wished her apprentice good fortune in Russia before disintegrating into so much dust, blowing into the wind and out of the world, forever.

-

Camilla sat there for a moment in contemplation of what had just happened. Then, after gathering herself, she travelled westward to find a boat to get to Russia, as she still lacked Japanese citizenship after 4 months of her training under Kumo Hai. However, as she made her way to the coast, another thought entered Camilla's mind, as despite their relationship, she felt that she never truly had a bond with the spider, and not fully understanding why this was. Nonetheless, she persisted until she saw the Sea of Japan, and just beyond the horizon, a small fishing boat that looked worthy enough to navigate the tumultuous waves of open water. Waving her arms in an enthusiastic piece of performance, the young woman drew the fishermen to the shore. And with some persuasion, cash, and mild seduction, Camilla managed to convince them to ferry her to the Russian coast, near the Amur River.

The dark snow clouds above the granular stony beach of Kamchatka rose like a dark spirit from the mouth of the Earth as white flakes fell softly like ash from the lightless sky, melting as they touched the frigid water of the northern Sea of Japan. Once they'd docked and Camilla left the boat, she then pulled her reliable trick on an old man in the Russian river town of Nikovliask, where the fishermen had landed, hiring him to take her northwest into Siberia, over 50 miles away, in the dead of winter.

--

As his 6-wheeler came to a stop, just beyond a large area of frozen forest, Camilla invited him to join her on a hike, batting her lashes as she did so. Relenting to this request as well, the man followed Camilla into the darkened taiga. Then, after a long trek through the forest, Camilla found what she'd been looking for.

-

Pulling a stag-like skull from the dirt, Camilla commenced the ritual as she was taught it by Kumo Hai. Replicating the ritual to Shuk'De'Caull, she managed to bring to life, from its black-blooded ruin, a wendigo, and with a kiss to its sharp, humanoid teeth, she placed the beast firmly under her control. Such a monster startled the old man, who attempted to run for his life back to his truck. But Camilla responded by commanding her creation to chase him down and kill him. The man never reached his vehicle, his true paint dyeing the snow. After her success, she moved on to the second piece of her puzzle. This involved a Russian website dedicated to staging events. As the government of the vast nation had been completely annihilated since 2012, the site was a hotbed of full-throttle Agorism, where flesh, drugs, and

lives were bought and sold without apology. Taking suggestive pictures of herself and broadcasting her location, she invited any man who found himself attracted to her to come and “claim their prize”. All they would have to do, she said, was to win a contest.

The initial arrivals were disturbed by not only the location, an icy forested region of Siberia that was, by this point, enwrapped within a blanket of snow, but also by what their hostess instructed them to do once they had made contact with her. Motioning to her wendigo servant, she stated the penalty for leaving would be death. With no options for escape, the men were forced to stay put, even as a continual stream of more meat was drawn into Camilla’s trap. As the hours passed and the bodies increased in volume, the wendigo grew yet more restless as its hunger began to gnaw. However, Camilla commanded the beast to stay put, and being controlled by the influence of Shuk’De’Caull, lacking any agency of its own, the antlered monster stood down. Camilla removed her broadcast when she was convinced that she had enough men for her project. Then, she addressed the entire group and sent her wendigo out to stalk the perimeter of the area, making sure that none in the gathering had the courage to flee. She proclaimed that all of them would, at this moment, compete for her hand, directing the mens’ attention to the large stump upon which she stood. She said that to earn her love, a pair at a time must fight to the death, and the victor must consume the flesh of the “lesser man”. Fear drove like a dagger into the hearts of the congregation, each of them looking at one another, evaluating their competition. Camilla then called 2 of them forward to a circle in the dirt, just in front of her. Once there, the wendigo’s cries in the distance would signal the match, and in time, the trees began to echo the elk-like wail, and the men immediately began to fight, viciously, desperately, clawing at one another, as if they were dogs fighting over scraps of food, knowing that their mutual lives hung in the balance, a raw savagery that drew a second audience, one just as eager as Camilla to possess the myriad of males gathered in their forest, or at least the stronger ones, those of them desperate enough to shed their vanity and consume human meat to avoid this quasi starvation, the deep craving for survival, and flesh.

-

It was over in minutes, blood dyed the victor’s hands and adorned the ground beneath his victim. He then looked up at Camilla, to which she responded by pointing at the body, commanding the victor to consume it. Hesitating slightly, he ultimately gave in and did as she instructed, biting off a ragged piece of his conquest’s jaw and swallowing it. But following this act, the victor felt a sudden pain rip through his mind and a viscous substance pump into his veins. Vomiting black blood, the victor screamed at the night-veiled sky as Camilla smiled. His screams slowly warped into the deathly cold cries of a dying elk before he collapsed into the muddy snow. Coming down to her first champion, she pricked her finger and forced him to ingest a drop of her own blood, so as to place the end-result under her lash, a trick revealed to her by Kumo Hai, who’d learned that Camilla’s blood could be used for the same purpose as the ritual. Unlike mortals, who needed to contact Shuk’De’Caull, Camilla had been created by him, and thus possessed a direct connection to the entity, whereas ordinary humans did not. This

granted her some of Shuk'De'Caull's abilities, but unlike her benefactor, she could use them in the physical world, without resorting to the ritual. In essence, she acted as an extension of Shuk'De'Caull, like a finger at the end of a hand that could not quite reach through the bars of a prison cell. The opaque goal of Shuk'De'Caull thus became apparent, at least to Camilla, as she used his gifts to dominate and control people, likely pleasing the entity, though she regarded his opinion little as she watched the victor transform into the second wendigo in what was to be her grand army. She then sent it into the forest to circle the site along with her first, before telling everyone else that these were their only options, to either become hers, or die. And so, the remainder of the fights commenced, each one resulting in a winner and a loser. Though, only once, a lone man could tolerate the situation no more and bolted for the trees, only to be torn to pieces by one the antlered soldiers, hiding within their dark embrace. This served as a lesson to all of the remaining men, that those who had fallen for Camilla had no chance of escaping her clutches. They would all, truly, either be hers or die, there was no in-between.

--

Only half of them endured to become wendigos. The rest were eaten by Camilla's horde when they had lost their duels. No one though, truly survived. Nonetheless, Camilla was satisfied with the army she had created. Using Kumo Hai's lessons of seduction, power, and manipulation, the woman who had been created as an object had been able to spawn and command a legion of one of the most powerful beings on the planet. Climbing atop the first one's back, Camilla motioned forward with her right hand, and the wendigo army lurched in the direction of North America. Camilla had not forgotten her vendetta against Ramsay the Ghost, for she saw, in him, another competitor, someone who could dominate her, something that she would never let happen again. So she would cast him from his white marble throne and kill him, she thought, then she could rule America in his place and create what she viewed as a better nation, perhaps even a better world, all under her antlered army. Shuk'De'Caull, the deity of domination, would get exactly what he wanted, whether his creation understood it or not.

Meanwhile, in the formerly thick forests of The Great Lakes Region in Canada, the Tear in Time, Blackheart, had carved a path of absorption and expulsion through the terrain, searching only for one thing, a cure for the maddening starvation that he truly embodied, the black hole that could never be filled, inherently unstable and wanting for everything in his path, be it a person, a tree, or an entire town, not one ounce of difference was made as he hovered northwest, slow and constant, inhaling everything and everyone before him.

---The Middle Ground---

For those who fear spiders, there can be no mercy. For those who love snakes, there can be no violence. So what happens if someone is found guilty of both? It is a dilemma, but one with a seemingly obvious solution. To kill those who fear spiders, while it would keep the arachnids from harm by their hand, would also deprive snakes of a valuable ally, as those who love snakes are few and far between. But to let the offender live would present the opposite problem. So then, what is the solution? Imprisonment and reeducation, to condition the offender to not fear spiders while keeping them behind bars until they are deemed cured of their arachnophobia and are subsequently released. This would eliminate the danger posed to spiders and keep a snake ally alive to assist the cause. This middle ground serves as something of a compromise, a third option that repairs the faulty wiring of an arachnopobe's brain while making sure that both parties are safe from harm. And releasing them after curing them would, hopefully, ensure that both they and the spiders have nothing further to fear.

---Mythos-Unfelt Death---

Bounding westward through the forests of the Yukon, a wendigo, formerly a broken-hearted madman who voluntarily became possessed by one of Geb's agents of vengeance, had travelled thousands of miles in search of sustenance, crossing the Canadian border from The United States long before Ramsay the Ghost had overtaken the latter country, or before Blackheart had hovered his way in the same direction. However, despite his avoidance of these more powerful presences, he was unable to do anything about his inevitable collision with the grand army, controlled by Camilla the Created, who had crossed the lawless Russian border into Alaska, via the vast sheet of ice that spanned the frozen continents. In time, they found each other in the mountainous region of Alaska's central frontier.

Camilla reacted with a measure of surprise when she saw it, for she had not thought of the possibility of another wendigo in the path of her army, nevermind an independent one. Descending from a large forested incline, the army was commanded to halt at the foot of the mountain when the characteristic shriek echoed from the east, just ahead of the convoy. Then, all at once, the army dispersed in all directions at the opening of Camilla's fist, which she held aloft as she thrust open her fingers in the biting wind. Several of her wendigos returned to her moments later, dragging the rogue behind them, having subdued it rather quickly, given their numerical advantage. Camilla then signalled for the rest of her pets to coalesse around her with a rapid reclosing of her hand, a slight motion that they had all been made to obey. She then pulled a knife and a length of rope from a bag around her waist and tied the rogue to a nearby tree, a pair of his manicured brethren holding him down as their trimmer brought the knife into contact with the captive's bare skull.

--

However, unable to subdue it, Camilla had the rogue wendigo dismembered by the others. The creature felt nothing as it was torn apart, exactly as its former identity had wanted so many years ago. It was the second time he'd been hurt by a woman, but this time, he felt nothing. But Camilla was just as unmoved, for she knew, at this point, that she was likely devoid of something that her human counterparts possessed. Some spark was missing from within her, a breathing creature who had been created, not born. Not unlike the army that she was ruling, forcing it to carry her upon its back into the vast Canadian wilderness, wherein she would cross paths with another creature who had been concocted, one just as hollow as she was. And like her army, he was perpetually afflicted with starvation.

---The Human Herbivores---

For all of my environmental rhetoric, it may be tempting to think me a vegan or vegetarian. However, this is not a lifestyle that I ascribe to, at least, not for so-called “ethical reasons”, for the sort of ethics that most with this mindset are concerned with are still rooted in that omnipresent human trait, vanity. It is simply applied differently than other strains of this, unfortunately, incurable virus.

When conversations with these sorts of vegans arise, one point nearly always rears its hooded head, *Lions eat meat, so what’s the problem?* Only to be met with a response along the lines of, *Because humans are not lions.* Counterpointed with, *well, neither are sharks, and they eat meat.* To this, the responses may vary. But the underlying point that this hypothetical vegan is attempting to make is that “humans are different”. But of course, they are anything but.

The problem is not that humans eat meat, the problem is that humans think themselves as some sort of “superior being” that is entitled to treat the world however it wants, then proceeding to do so. Nature, in reality, is complicated, snakes eat other snakes, hippos eat the animal dead, and cats chew on grass. The truth is that it doesn’t matter what something eats, as long as it does not think itself as “superior” while it does, then ceases consumption after it’s satisfaction has been reached, lest it become a wendigo. Humans have demonstrated no such restraint. But when a few of them adopt veganism, they can keep their vanity intact while their vegetable farms kill as many species as CAFOs do, tearing the homes from their non-human inhabitants and killing any that attempt to scratch a living from the same source as them. But, as long as you eat lettuce rather than steak, then you can feel like a “good person”, regardless of the destruction that your species still causes, destruction that you ignore. It is just more self-importance and elitism, the only difference is that vegans feel as though they can look at themselves in the mirror, pat themselves on the back, and absolve themselves of any responsibility as the world burns down around them.

---The Scars that Speak---

The approval and companionship of others is an all-too exclusive commodity. However, this does not stop some people from trying to connect with anything they can, even if it causes them pain, loss, or death.

The darkened room echoed with cries heard by no one else. Because there was no one else. Joshua clutched his head, rocking back and forth on his dingy wooden floor, screaming silently to himself as a knife lay on the small table, just a few feet in front of him, a knife that had nearly met his jugular vein in an attempt to take his own life. The voices could not reach him, not when they had no mouths to speak with, and with none around, Joshua felt hopeless and alone as their cries grew louder and louder with every passing moment. In his fit of anguish, he grabbed the blade from the table and slashed his arm, in a desperate bid to shock himself out of his delirium, to feel something, anything. However, the laceration left by the cut did little more than sting, at first. For once the pain became apparent and his nerves began to fire rapidly and sporadically from the boundaries of the injury, Joshua heard a voice come from the opening, one that spoke the words, *Hey, don't be scared, I'm just a part of you. I want to be your friend. It seems like you need one. Maybe, you need more than one.* Joshua was initially terrified, but when he heard the cut explicate its declaration of friendship, he calmed and smiled, amazed that a voice was coming from somewhere that was not within his own mind. Talking to it, he found it a pleasant conversationalist, able to understand him where no human ever seemed to. So taken with his new friend was Joshua, that when his gash suggested that he "make more friends like it", he enthusiastically obliged, slicing into his other arm with a desperate vigor that was genuinely difficult to describe. This second laceration was charming as well, honeying its words enough to convince Joshua to "make a third friend". Then another, and another, and another, for hours he slashed into his body, each cut convincing him to create another, then that one would do the same, and so on and on he sliced, making ever more friends as he did so. Until, finally, he felt himself go unconscious.

Knocks upon his door roused him not. So due to a friend calling for a welfare check on Joshua, the police eventually decided to kick their way into his house, in the hopes that if he required medical attention, then it could be administered promptly. But downing the door only revealed his corpse, grey, desiccated, and patterned with a jacket of slashes, and pooling deep red blood, the wounds weeping as Joshua died, believing himself to be entirely alone.

---Freedom Forbidden---

Of all the grievances I have cast upon society, there is one of particular annoyance and relentless frustration and anger, the feeling of a straight jacket leashing me to a steel post. It comes in many guises, but they, like the Hindu pantheon of gods, are ultimately aspects of the same thing. Symptoms of the same disease. A crippling blight that stunts individuals and opportunities, and feeds off of those that it debilitates like a feverish virus, a pathogen that

spreads from a single source, the ones who place themselves in charge of others. Here is the Trimurti of that proverbial illness.

The barring and micromanaging of travel between international borders by petty bureaucratic parasites and obstructions, like plaque clogging the world's arteries, both artificial and natural, is a travesty and an inconvenience. Likewise, the regulation of things like cars and other types of personal motorized transport does nothing but tether one and their property to those who wish only to control them by keeping them sedentary and locked in place.

Another is the regulation and restriction of weapons or self-defensive tools. For example, in Australia, citizens are barred from carrying anything with which they might be able to defend themselves on their own terms, such as pepper spray, forcing potential victims of crimes to rely upon others or the police to do so. But what this does, in reality, is systematically strip people of any independence by removing their ability to hold any kind of power or control over their own circumstances, much like the regulation of vehicles. But rather than restrict one's ability to run, the regulation and restriction of weapons takes away one's ability to fight, thus neutering any semblance of power that the individual may have under the long shadow of the state.

The third and final example of this type of restraint is censorship of both entertainment, in the form of copyright laws, and knowledge, in the form of collegiate fees, prerequisites, and other sorts of academic paywalls that prevent individuals from gaining knowledge or enlightenment from convenient sources. This is most often due to either oversensitivity to certain types of subject matter, political aims, or simple and ruthless greed. Any one of these motivating factors can lead to those in power dictating what the individuals have access to. Because, as they say, knowledge is power, but those who hold it within their grasp want nothing more than to make the curious and those with potential ignorant, as the blissful never care to stray further than their social corral.

In summation, curated and controlled society, including censorship, travel and mobility restrictions, regulation of weapons, among other things, are all a result of that omnipresent virus of human vanity. As has been stated countless times, people think themselves better than all other life, therefore they see it as acceptable to curate and control it, both within and without their species. But, as I have said, in not so concise a manner as this, freedom is power and power is freedom. Freedom is possessing the power to do things as you see fit, and power is possessing the freedom to do things as you, the individual, sees necessary. Though not the same thing on their own, they are inextricably linked to one another. And for those with both, retaining them

often means restricting them from all others, whether or not it is truly practical or justified to do so. As such, this principle also applies to all living things, notably, other animals, who have suffered this kind of control and curation more thoroughly than anything with hair and 2 legs ever has. So much so, that many have been bred into slavery by those in power. And what do those in power crave from others? Just like they want dogs “domesticated” into servitude, so too do they wish the same thing for the individuals of their own species upon whom they can inflict their will. And for those they cannot, those beings that do not conform to what humanity wants, for example snakes, spiders and the like? Exactly what a despot does to anything that acts on its own accord.

But what is the vaccine for this virus of vanity? Well, the one I offer to the reader is to learn the lessons that despised animals can teach us, resistance, persistence, individualism, and nonconformity. In other words, true freedom means freedom from humanity, for the individual, as well as for all living things, as none have more right to this freedom than them. And to those people who use their freedom from humanity to help other animals who need it most, I say, the world desperately needs more like you.

---Mythos-The Final Days of Sodom---

“Thus he destroyed these cities and the entire plain, including all the inhabitants of these cities and everything that grew on the ground”

-Luke 17:25

“It was the same in the days of Lot, people ate, drank, bought, sold, planted, and built. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all”

-Luke 17:28-29

The violent pulses of electricity struck through every nerve in her body, channeled by the copper rods that the king had surgically implanted into her, and the water lining the floor upon which she stood, emaciated and close to death. She did not even bother to beg for her life, knowing that it was forfeit the second that Ramsay sat upon that mountain of rubble, just a few months earlier, taking the military under his snake tendrils and killing the commanders with weapons of every description, a fate shared by nearly every citizen around which he could wrap his black-gloved hands. And from guns, to blades, to everything in between, The Ghost made America howl. Across the entire nation, his murderous exploits were at their most depraved. His brutality was magnified within the vast network of concentration camps that he’d commissioned within just a few weeks of his ascension to power, resulting in poorly constructed fences comprising the majority of their makeup, consisting of little more than tall wooden poles staked into the ground, crudely lashed together with razor wire. Punji stakes lined the outer perimeters, their points thrusting inward to prevent escape. At all of these glorified cattle pens, The Ghost’s military converts took notes from his playbook and contorted their flock of prisoners, one by one, into grotesque aftermaths of days-long marathons of unrelenting torture. Methods of this carnage included mainly those used by Ramsay in the past, scaphism, flaying, decapitation, ling-chi, feeding to hounds, unseeding, and many others. But this omnipresent violence only generated more bloodshed, as the citizens constantly retaliated by doing the same to more and more snakes of every species, venomous or not, flooding The Ghost with yet more power. Power that he subsequently used to inflict more punishment upon those who, in the mind of America’s king, deserved death. It was a battle that humanity could never hope to win, as with every dead snake, the number of people continually dwindled, which would eventually lead to their inevitable extinction.

--

As one might anticipate, most of the citizenry knelt not, instead resorting to insurgencies and protests that usually culminated in gory clashes with the agents of Ramsay, ending with

hundreds of the dissenters dead. But even still, they did not stop killing snakes, not knowing that the more they killed, the more powerful their own oppressor became. But this the latter knew well, and subsequently used his ever-broadening scythe to inflict an equalizing level of devastation upon the people of The United States of America.

From the extensive list of Ramsay's killings, to the correlation between his victims, their faith, and their transgressions against serpents, to the overwhelming increase in rattlesnake cullings coinciding with The Ghost's rapid increase in power, and finally linking it all back to Ryu's curse in Eden, the evidence was undeniable. And taken together, the truth became clear, even to the one called god.

-

So, this is all your fault, said Ryu. The duo were still hiding in Mexico City, holding up in the basement of a local church. *No, I didn't choose to kill anyone!* Shot Yahweh, his vanity showing once again. Ryu wasn't budging though, referencing the time that the god cursed the town of Sweetwater, leading Ramsay to later kill them all. Yahweh had been forced to confront the truth, as the pair deduced the source of Ramsay's power from Yahweh's encounter at The White House. The snake then declared that all of these deaths were ultimately on Yahweh's hands, saying that if he hadn't cursed him, then Ramsay would never have been created in the first place. Yahweh grimaced at this statement, but hung his head down with a sigh, his constitution broken, knowing, deep down, that Ryu was right. As vain as he was, even he could see that he had been the one responsible, though he neglected to admit this aloud. However, Ryu saw it all written on his face, that ever so uncomfortable feeling that itches like a festering abrasion, just below the surface of the skin, remorse. Yahweh then turned and asked Ryu the first honest question of their mutual lives, *How do I fix this?* But the deity retreated into his shell of self-righteousness when Ryu delivered the obvious answer, to lift his curse. Despite all that had transpired, Yahweh still could not bring himself to repeal an act upon which his entire religion had been constructed, as to do so would be an admission of fault, which he had never allowed himself to do before, which would undoubtedly undermine his support system, possibly even leading to his own erasure from reality. But the snake simply sighed and looked upon Yahweh with nothing more than cynical contempt, then asked what he was going to do instead. Yahweh thought for a moment and concluded that since he'd been injured by Ramsay, then the reverse must also be true, a powerful enough entity with a powerful enough weapon could probably harm him. And with that, he stood up and declared that he would kill Ramsay the Ghost and assume his "rightful place" upon the "throne of mankind". Ryu shook his head and followed him out of the city to a nearby mountainside, out of which protruded a cluster of massive black rocks. Ryu inquired about what Yahweh was going to do with obsidian, to which the latter proclaimed that he was going to create a divine weapon to match his enemy, then proceeded to bring forth large pieces of the volcanic glass and iron from the mountain, and fashioned the minerals into a great spear, bearing a marked resemblance to the one that lanced Christ as he died on the cross.

Grasping his weapon, Yahweh then cast himself across the border to The United States, Ryu trailing behind him.

Ramsay had tired of his prisoner in the “water cell”, having proclaimed that he’d “had enough of her existence” and decided to send a final jolt of electricity through her body with such energy that she went into cardiac arrest and collapsed into the filthy water. The Ghost then callously disposed of her and the cell by having them both set on fire. But as he leaned back on his throne and smiled beneath his mask, a faint shape came into view from above. And in a split-second, Yahweh landed on the ground, cracking the Earth beneath his feet, furiously brandishing his spear. Ramsay casually stood up and asked, *Haven’t we been through this already?* Extending his serpent tendrils, claiming that Yahweh could not kill him. But the deity heeded his enemy not as he lunged forth with his javelin pointed directly at Ramsay’s chest. But his expression of fury became crestfallen when the razor edge of the spearpoint made no contact with his enemy’s body, The Ghost having caught it in the mouths of his tendrils. He then lifted Yahweh into the air and drew a dagger from his poncho. Yahweh thought quickly however, and let go of his lance, letting himself drop to the ground before turning and running again. But before he made it within 10 feet, he felt a violent stab of pain. Craning his neck, he was horrified at the sight of his own spear embedded in his back, becoming even more fearful when this was followed seconds later by the knife thrusting itself into his leg, making him fall to the ground. Ramsay then pulled out a pair of revolvers and began to fire rounds into Yahweh, who gradually grew weaker as his blood was finding its liberation. But before he collapsed altogether, Yahweh summoned his remaining strength, pulled the deadly objects from his back and thigh, and sped off into the west, leaving the blade and spear behind as he escaped. This time though, after retrieving the weapons, Ramsay gave chase, determined to end his only potential challenger, forever. And chase he gave as he disappeared into the daylight haze.

---Mythos-Ceaseless Hunger---

“Mother Earth has been pillaged, stripped of her essential elements. A violation that has awakened the Malevolent Spirit, seeking the lost, the frail, and depraved. It is within us all. Pray it desires not you”

-Ojibwe warning-Antlers

Far to the north, away from Yahweh’s date with destiny, another confrontation was rearing like a cobra, ready to strike, if not avoided. Sadly though, humanity seeks to consume all that lies before it. And the dual epitomes of this most venomous of traits were on a collision course,

made inevitable by the same driving force that guided the species that they represented, unflinching, endless, ceaseless hunger.

--

She spotted it after crossing her army into the northwestern reaches of Ontario, Canada, the land where the Algonquin peoples first created the legend of the wendigo. But it was not a human that Camilla was seeing, rather, a black void, drawing in everything around it, the matter elongating in a fit of spaghettification before disappearing into the pitiless maw of cold nothingness. Anthropoid in appearance, the wraith-like creature raised its head and appeared to look at her, surveying the army of wendigos that she'd brought with her. Then, against all presuppositions, the entity spoke. It asked what a woman was doing there with "a band of elk", to which Camilla responded with a similar question, *what are you?* The entity, wishing desperately to confess his darkest burdens to the first one who'd asked him anything, uttered only one name, Blackheart, and said that he had been brought into the world twice against his will, only to be rejected, destroyed, then reborn. He claimed that he was starving, but that it was not just hunger panging against him, he felt as if his very atoms could not decide whether or not to kill him, to put him out of his misery. He said that felt like a living wound, oozing with starvation, as if he shed black blood and could not exist outside the bounds of eternal famine. Camilla made these connections to her wendigos, then, interpreting the truth of his discordant physical state, challenged Blackheart to consume them all, her entire army, dismounting her antlered steed after issuing her declaration of war. Obliging, the former android approached the swarm, but as he did, Camilla ordered all of the wendigos to charge in unison at him, to sacrifice themselves by leaping into Blackheart's being, as if forcing that which he so desperately desired down his dark throat in an attempt to asphyxiate him to death. Blackheart was unaccustomed to eating more than what his constitution could handle and therefore was all too happy to inhale them all, one by one. But as the wendigos kept throwing themselves in, Blackheart gathered what was truly going on, for he was taking in matter faster than he could shed it, and in a panic, he attempted to fight the wendigos off, but was unable to overpower them, as he was physically unstable, and unable to grasp or block the solid forms of his enemies, leaving the living void but a single option, to flee into the forest with his pursuers close behind, every last one who reached him disappearing into the black hole. Camilla followed at a distance, near enough to witness the actions of her army unfolding as more and more of them forced themselves into the void without placing herself in harm's way, content to let her army do the work for her.

The mob of antlers continuously harried Blackheart's floating form for miles, but eventually, the wound in space-time decided to stop and face his opponents on a frozen lake. However, the large predators that followed him onto the ice had begun to make the sheet crack beneath their feet as they thundered after their quarry, never relenting their chase and suicidal plunges. Camilla's own feet skidded to a halt when she saw the lake, but at no point did she call her army back, hoping that the ice would hold long enough for Blackheart's atomic structure to fail before the lake surface gave way, neutralizing the wendigos and allowing Blackheart to float above the

surface and slip away, potentially placing her in danger. But the void wasn't budging, as his constitution was tearing itself apart at the seams.

-

The volume of the wendigos was depleting as more and more of them were drawn into Blackheart. However, the latter soon began to feel himself unravelling. And eventually, his composure ripped open, causing him to completely atomize once again. Light then emitted from deep within his pitch body, tearing through him like a white-hot knife. A metallic scream reverberated throughout the forest as the light became brighter. Then, the cry of Blackheart abruptly silenced. There was no sound of an explosion, no fire, no smoke. Simply a noiseless force that threw Camilla backward into a tree and temporarily blinded her. It was as though a great star had died in deep space, all the power of the universe unleashed without so much as a whisper. When the forest darkened again, she collected herself from the frozen dirt, looked around, and noticed that all of her wendigos were gone, taken into the void when Blackheart died. Having lost her army, Camilla the Created finally found herself physically exhausted and mentally drained. And at that moment, she decided to call off her retributive quest against Ramsay, choosing instead to go east, towards Newfoundland, knowing that The Ghost could not pursue her beyond the borders of The United States.

Nearly a month following her victory over Blackheart, Camilla finally reached the city of Montreal, when her long hike came to an end. So taxing was this last endeavor that she collapsed into the street as soon as she saw the lights of the skyscrapers glowing against the night sky, as if to spite the moon. But Camilla remained conscious for long enough to see the silhouette of someone running towards her, kneeling down, and calling for help.

The faint sound of a heart monitor was the first thing that Camilla heard as consciousness found her. She was lying in a hospital bed. Upon her utterance of some vague description of "water", the attendant nurse retrieved for her a small glass. She asked the nurse how she'd managed to get to a hospital, and was met with a response that she was far from anticipating, an old man had brought her there. Surprised by this notion, that a man had saved her, she said nothing as she laid back down in silence. Understanding that her patient wished to be left alone, the nurse said that she would let her rest, and filed out of the room. Camilla thought much about her circumstances, about everything that she had done and everything that had been done to her over the course of her short life. She thought about the man who had created her, the monster she had tried to hunt down, the monster who had mentored her, the legion of monsters that she had created, and the monster she had met and destroyed above the frozen lake. But most of all, she thought of the monster that she had become in pursuit of her goals, the people she had slaughtered, the people she had transformed and controlled, then commanded to commit

suicide for the sake of her own victory. And for what? For what? She kept asking herself, *for what?*

-

An hour later, the nurse returned to Camilla's bedside, after an examination by the physician, and said that the doctor had medically cleared her to leave, handing Camilla her discharge papers, though the name section was left blank. The nurse then pointed her pen at the empty line and said, *Now, all we need is your name, and you are good to go.* Camilla looked around, unsure of what to say, after all, her name had never been her own, it had been chosen for her by a graverobber who had stolen another woman's skull to create one for himself to love, a man she had since learned to loathe. The nurse then asked a question that Camilla had never thought to ask herself, *Who are you?*

-

She was silent, not knowing the answer.

---Mythos-Deus est Mortuus---

"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves?"

-Friedrich Neitzche

Archangel Michael sat upon Yahweh's throne in Paradiso. It had been too long, he thought, too long for his master to be gone. Yahweh had said that he was going to deal with The Snake of Eden, but had yet to return, and the other angels were growing restless. So much so, that they began suggesting an expedition to Earth and attempting to find him themselves. Michael then called a meeting of the angels, of which there were only 7. These were beings that Yahweh had created in the time where he possessed the power to do so, pouring large amounts of his own vitality into them, almost like forging 7 smaller extensions of himself. However, he had only been able to create a finite number of them, due to desiring retention of his apex status in Paradiso, a realm that he'd also made from his own energy. And the more power that he stored in these creations, the more diluted and impotent he became. The archangels acted almost as vessels of their master's strength, being directly tethered to him on a fundamental level. However, they were not privy to everything that Yahweh experienced, so they were in the dark about his predicament with Ramsay. The servants of Yahweh all gathered in the great throne room of Paradiso to agree on a strategy to find their master. Gabriel offered to scout the Earth for him, to

which Michael agreed, but advised that he bring Uriel with him, in the event that Yahweh required assistance, adding that once they found him, they should call the others to their location if their master was in any peril, not seriously believing that this might actually be the situation. Accepting the task, the 2 archangels left Paradiso and flew across the skies, scanning like eagles for their maker.

Yahweh was thrown into a church, breaking through the stained glass window before he landed forcefully into the pews. The ongoing service abruptly halted as the very deity that the congregation praised literally fell, right before their eyes. Getting up quickly, Yahweh staggered towards the exit, but before he could escape, the great wooden doors were thrust open and 4 metal snakes struck him repeatedly until he was forced into the altar. Then, one of the serpents wrapped itself around the priest and pulled him upward, followed by the other 3 throwing loops around his limbs, all 4 holding him above the heads of the worshippers. Ramsay then entered the church, and dared Yahweh to save his worshippers, waiting for his enemy to lunge at him before ripping the priest's limbs from his body, letting his torso fall and his insides rain down on the screaming congregation. Ramsay's tendrils then struck Yahweh again, their teeth latching onto him, blood dripping from the metal-embedded wounds. Yahweh screamed aloud, but just as Ramsay was about to pull him apart like his priest, a sword found its way through the tendrils holding Yahweh, severing them and saving him from mutilation. Ramsay looked upward toward the direction that the blade had come from, only to be met with another sword being thrown from the sky, striking the pulpit behind him as he dodged the weapon. Regrowing his tendrils, Ramsay readied himself as all 7 archangels descended into the church, armed with swords that could match his bladed serpent weapons, one of which he thrust at Gabriel. But the angel countered it with a swift motion, decapitating the metallic snake. Ramsay felt his rage increase with this symbolic act and decided to retract his tendrils. If he was going to do this, he thought, then he would have to do it the "old fashioned way". The Ghost then drew a revolver and shot Gabriel 7 times in the chest before the latter could react, falling against the wall where he rapidly bled to death, a symbolic punishment to match the archangel's emblematic act of defiance. The revelation that they could die shocked the 6 remaining angels, as well as Yahweh, who had never before witnessed the death of something so powerful. Ramsay slowly turned his head to look at the terrified deities before him, and cracked a smile when he saw their fear. Remiel spread his wings and launched himself at Ramsay, blinded by his fear and rage to such a degree that he neglected to even use his sword, tackling his adversary through the wall and into the dust outside, knocking the revolver from his hand. The Ghost hit the ground and Remiel wrapped his fingers around his throat, trying to choke him. In response, Ramsay, being constantly invigorated with yet more abilities, summoned a snake familiar from behind the angel's wings that slithered up Remiel's back and bit him on the neck, throwing coils around it and rapidly beginning to constrict, forcing Remiel to release his own grip. Ramsay then righted himself and used his telekinesis to pull Remiel's wings outward until a sharp crack was heard from them. Just then, Sariel flew over and landed a kick on Ramsay's head, resulting in the latter's hat being thrown off. The Ghost then summoned a dog to attack Remiel, the phantasmal canine mauling the angel's face before ruthlessly tearing his jaw from his head and devouring

his throat and eyes. Ramsay turned to Sariel and drew a machete, lunging at the angel before another, Raguel, brought forth a whip, and lashed it at The Ghost, who promptly blocked it, resulting in the whip's end wrapping around his wrist, wrenching the blade from his grasp. In response, Ramsay telekinetically threw Raguel to the ground and sent his dog at him, but his canine was killed after Raguel gored it with the machete after picking it up, letting go of the whip, exactly as Ramsay wanted. He then telekinetically called the lash into his open hand just as Sariel nearly impaled him with a sword from the other direction. The Ghost struck Sariel with the divine whip, leaving a long wound across his face, causing him to drop his weapon, at which point, Ramsay discarded the whip, leaped forward, snatched the sword, and brought the blade through Sariel's neck, cutting his head from his shoulders. Raguel froze in disbelief as Ramsay summoned another dog to do what the other familiar had failed to, tearing the angel's body apart.

With only Michael, Rafael, and Uriel remaining, Yahweh, still in the church, commanded them to retreat to the nearby Colorado mountains where they could use the terrain to shield themselves from Ramsay's attacks, realizing that they were outmatched in the open. In unison, the deities agreed and made for the rocky peaks, just as Ramsay erased his canine familiar from existence and watched the angels fly. Manifesting a bow, The Ghost notched an arrow, took a breath, and loosed the shaft.

-

As the 4 creatures flew, Uriel was struck through the heart with the arrow, falling from the sky to his death in an Icarusian fashion that, again, thunderstruck the ones who formerly thought themselves invincible. Only 3 of them remained at this point, and all of them had begun to believe that they may, indeed, be replaced by Ramsay as rulers of humanity. All of them, that was, with the exception of Yahweh, who still thought that he could solve the problem he had created by killing Ramsay and retaining his illusionary infallibility, convinced, even now, that he could do no wrong, at least morally, as he believed himself to be "on the side of good", despite refusing to admit his mistake and lift the curse that had started it all. And with his divine vessels being whittled down, his own power was waning, making the victory of his monster ever more a certainty.

-

After Ramsay saw the angel fall, from his position at the destroyed church, he peered around in observance of the dead angels' bloody, mangled remains. A distant cry though, snared his attention, allowing him to see the fleeing worshippers of Yahweh who'd survived the chaos. Extending his tendrils, Ramsay effortlessly cut them all down as they ran, for they were, every last one of them, guilty of killing rattlesnakes, as he had seen in his mind. The Ghost then disappeared into the haze, awaiting his inadvertent creator's next move.

Yahweh had reached the chosen mountain before the others, having not flown with wings as his angels did, but once they arrived, their expressions were pleaseless to say the least. Rafael yelled at Yahweh upon his landing, demanding to know why his master had not informed them of such a being as could kill angels. Yahweh hastily explained that he had not even known of Ramsay's existence until a few months ago, adding that by the time he'd become aware, The Ghost had already become powerful enough to rival him. Michael then asked him how something like Ramsay could even exist at all, let alone kill indiscriminately without him knowing. Yahweh then let slip that Ramsay's killings weren't indiscriminate. Rafael interjected, asking him what he meant. Yahweh then confessed that Ramsay's targets had all either attempted to stop him or, he paused, then revealed the true motivation of The Ghost's actions, to avenge the deaths of rattlesnakes in The United States by killing all humans who killed the serpents out of prejudice, fear, or malice. Rafael then asked why Ramsay would kill for such a reason, only for Michael to piece the events together, realizing aloud that it was because of Yahweh's curse upon The Snake of Eden, thousands of years ago, a blight that he inflicted to preserve the myth of his own superiority and righteousness, to shift any blame anywhere else that he could think of to save his reputation and keep his propaganda intact, because he was a manifestation of humanity's vanity, and so recoiled at the idea that he was anything shy of perfect. Yahweh sighed, finally appearing to understand this. Rafael then asked him how he could allow his worshippers to die for his pride, to which Yahweh said nothing. Michael finally asked the question that had been looming in the background for centuries, the most important question that humanity and its creations could ever ask themselves, *I guess the question is, which is worth more to us? Our pride or our lives?* The 2 angels looked at each other as their master sat upon the mountain, dejected. Then, they both agreed aloud that Yahweh should make amends and lift the curse on The Eden Serpent, as doing so would likely result in Ramsay's erasure from reality, his fuel for existence cut, for without the constant murders of snakes, their avenging angel would have no more reason to remain in the world. Yahweh responded at first with his usual evasion, claiming that he knew not where Ryu even was, to which Rafael responded by reminding him that he had found the snake before, and that he could do so again. The archangel then turned to his compatriot, declaring that when Yahweh moved from the mountains, they would hold off The Ghost for as long as they could to provide time enough for their creator to find Ryu and lift the curse, otherwise, Ramsay's violent rule would be endless and absolute. Michael told Yahweh to go, immediately, and find The Snake of Eden and rescind his divinity, while they kept the enemy at bay. Reluctantly, Yahweh cast himself forth from the mountains, while Michael and Rafael took to the skies in search of Ramsay the Ghost.

The metallic serpent drew its way from deep within the flesh of another snake killer's back into Ramsay's poncho as he flicked his head to look behind him through the open frame that he'd torn its door free from. His power had now become so pronounced that he could feel the movements of other entities, should their presence be grand enough, and even with his capacity diminished, Yahweh's still echoed with a wail of vanity and panic. The Serpent Avenger smiled

as he disappeared into the fog that enveloped the region, vowing that this time, Yahweh would not escape.

Yahweh landed as lightly as he could on the blackened Earth. Looking around, he now truly saw the devastation unleashed by Ramsay as a result of the ruins' previous inhabitants' thorough dedication to prostrating themselves before their god. So involved were they, that they withstood their own curse, paying with the lives of serpents for immunity to the animals' venom. This, naturally, had drawn the ire of Ramsay, who slaughtered them all for their bargain with Yahweh, who looked upon those ashen ruins, punctuated with the charred decaying remains of the beings of what was once Sweetwater, Texas. Quietly walking about the burned-out husks of buildings, Yahweh was contemplating the prospect of withdrawing the curse. The idea that he would no longer be a god to his worshippers after his admission of fallibility nagged at his ear, begging him not to go through with it. However, the idea of being killed for doing the opposite was a screech upon the record, screaming at him the threat of losing his very life and being replaced by a monster that his actions had created. Still wrestling with this dilemma, the deity finally found who he had guessed would be in the town, as he rounded the corner of a broken wall and came face to face with Ryu the Great Python, who lifted his head to look at him. Yahweh said nothing however, and neither did Ryu. The former sat down next to the snake, resting his back against the wall on the other side. The serpent made no attempt to stop him or drive him off, completely disheartened to the point of depression, not even bothering to ask his tormentor why he was even there. Yahweh then muttered the last thing that Ryu had ever anticipated, *I'm sorry.* Ryu was surprised at first, but rolled his eyes and accused Yahweh of being disingenuous with him, claiming that he was only attempting reconciliation because Ramsay had grown powerful enough to challenge and kill him, concluding that the deity was never going to lift his curse, regardless of the words that he said. Yahweh responded that he didn't blame Ryu for believing that, admitting that he'd given the snake no reason to trust him. However, he added that he could trust his self-interest, that, given the choice of humility or death, he would surely choose the former. Ryu remained unconvinced, asking Yahweh if he was truly willing to sacrifice his own divinity for him, the being that he had spent millenia slandering and vilifying, so much so that the resulting persecution had given birth to the most murderous entity ever spawned. Yahweh said nothing, and Ryu sighed, saying *That's what I thought* as he rested his head upon his great coil. Yahweh knew, deep down, that it would take every ounce of divinity from him, should he go through with Michael's strategy, as acting in contradiction to his most essential ingredient would most likely mean that he would die, or at the very least, become a mortal being, bereft of any and all supernatural abilities. Ryu likely presumed this as well, the reason for his current hopelessness, as never did he actually believe that a being born from humanity's vanity, hubris, self-importance, and elitism would ever willfully sacrifice his ego over the altar of another living thing. And so, the creatures simply sat, back to back against the brick wall, waiting for Yahweh to make a decision.

North of their creator, in the desolate mountains of Wyoming, The Archangels had fixed their sights on Ramsay, who had chosen to target Yahweh's vessels before going after the deity they acted as repositories for. Though, they knew not his premeditated intentions as they swooped down to attack him. The Ghost looked up as they approached, drew a dagger, and reached out with his telekinesis, pulling Rafael from the sky, but not to the ground, choosing instead to catch the angel as he passed over him, clinging to his wing as he flapped incumberantly, close to the ground. Michael saw this and dove after them, drawing his sword to hopefully strike The Ghost from Rafael's wing. However, this was in vain, as Ramsay, again, used his telekinesis to roll Rafael upside down in mid-air, catching Michael off-guard and forcing him to come to an abrupt stop before he gutted his ally by mistake. Ramsay grinned and threw his dagger at Michael, who failed to intercept the blade in his surprise before it became lodged in his leg, forcing him to land painfully on a nearby rock. Ramsay then directed his and Rafael's trajectory downward, making the angel, beneath him, crash into a slab of granite that jutted precariously out of a hillside, breaking his wings and spine in a single motion. The Ghost then drew another dagger and put it to Rafael's throat. But before he could end him, Michael came in from behind, hitting Ramsay in the back before he could counter anything, sending the killer over the edge of the granite slab, though, unbeknownst to Michael, The Ghost had managed to catch himself on the edge of the overhang, disappearing before the angel could confirm his fall. Rafael was grievously injured, but had strength enough to point weakly behind Michael, who wasn't fast enough to wheel around before a machete was swung into his body, slicing the Archangel in half, even through his armor. Ramsay then revealed himself, reappearing above the fallen body, finishing Michael off with Yahweh's obsidian spear, jamming it through the angel's neck, nearly decapitating him. Rafael remained prone and helpless as The Ghost knelt over him. Rafael then asked him a single question before he was killed, *How could my god have created something as vile as you?* To which Ramsay responded, *god?* he chuckled, *I am made in the image of man. I am what they truly are. I am their sins, their violence, and their hell. And hell follows with me. Wherever violence against my charge drips blood upon this land, I will follow. And the guilty will suffer and die.* With that, Ramsay summoned a large snake familiar that struck Rafael's face, threw its body into loops around the angel, and slowly constricted him to death.

Back in Sweetwater, Yahweh felt a sudden stab of pain reverberate through his entire body. He understood what it meant, horrified at the revelation, that all of his vessels of power had been snuffed out. In a panic, he looked over the wall to find Ryu, still laying there. The words within him were begging to be let out, the spell was screaming to be broken, but they were being locked in by that ever-so persistent vanity, refusing to let him do what he knew would save everything on Earth. Then, as if feeling the dark presence bleeding through him, Yahweh turned nervously to see Ramsay staring him down at the other end of the ruins of Sweetwater. Clutched in his fist was the severed head of Rafael, dripping with angelic blood. He tossed it forward onto the ground, where it rolled to Yaweh's feet, the last piece of his power, severed completely. Ramsay then extended his tendrils, making Yahweh's eyes widen with terror before he dove behind the wall, landing on Ryu, who was incensed briefly before reverting back to melancholy. At least, just before Ramsay's strikes roused him from his stupor. Yahweh rolled

over the snake and stood up, only for Ramsay to unleash a pack of canine familiars upon him that tackled Yahweh to the ground and bit him relentlessly. Ramsay then pulled a mace from his poncho and leaped over the wall, bypassing Ryu and cudgeling Yahweh. Fed up, Yahweh did something his vanity had kept him from doing until this moment, and levitated a large rock from the ground while being dragged left and right by Ramsay's dogs, and hurled it at his attackers. The brutal simplicity of a stone was more effective than the deity had thought, previously regarding them as "primitive", entirely unsuited to a god like himself, a notion that proved itself unfounded as the familiars were killed and Ramsay was hit, sending him across the town and into the dust. Yahweh recovered himself and attempted to make his way back to Ryu, but the snake had taken off, sheltering in one of the burned-out shells of houses nearby, though Yahweh knew not which one. A snake tendril then connected with his head, its metal teeth biting into him. He found himself being hoisted into the air by his nemesis, who hurled a barrage of blades at him. These tore holes into the deity, leaving deep gashes in his body as he was thrown into a nearby building, adjacent to the wall. Ramsay followed his quarry into the hole he'd made and drew a pair of machetes. Surprised to see the deity gone though, The Ghost began slowly moving about the house, scanning every room until he was attacked with another boulder from out back. But this time, he managed to catch the stone, holding it with his telekinesis. Yahweh suddenly lunged at him from behind, striking him with his own discarded mace. Ramsay staggered back, turned, and threw the boulder at his opponent, who was thrust out of the front door and nearly crushed. Ramsay then retrieved his machetes from the house and followed Yahweh out, where he was attacked again from the side, but parried the mace with his blade. The enemies stared each other down briefly in a deadlock before Ramsay flicked his eyes to his left. Yahweh was startled as a large dog leaped from behind the brick wall and assailed him, allowing Ramsay to disengage and cast aside the mace that Yahweh had dropped. The deity had pieces torn from him second by second, but managed to throw the dog off of him and limp to his feet. Nevertheless, he was too weak now to run, hide, or fight, as Ramsay struck him again and again with his tendrils, each time leaving wound after wound in Yahweh, further weakening the previously powerful tulpa, who collapsed in a final effort to flee, only being able to crawl on his belly as he left a trail of blood behind him. Nearly at death's door, and with his injuries mounting, Yahweh did the only thing he could. As The Ghost continued to strike him, the being who was once called god begged for Ryu for help, pleading with the snake he'd cursed to save him so he could lift it. He continued to beg as he crawled into a home without a roof, his monster never relenting, drawing more and more blades and bullets that became ornaments in Yahweh's flesh, all the while continuing to strike with his tendrils.

-

Ryu heard Yahweh's pleas from the house next door. The fear and desperation in the latter's voice became ever more apparent in his screams of pain. The Snake of Eden decided to at least see what was going on with his old tormentor. Slithering out from his hiding place, he rounded the corner, only to be met with a scene that he'd never imagined. All he saw were Yahweh's legs kicking wildly as blood flowed from the open door out of which they protruded, their owner screaming and begging for Ryu. Ramsay the Ghost and his metallic snakes recoiling but to bite as he stood there calm and unflinching, waiting like a komodo dragon for his

prey to die, never once staying his onslaught. Ryu felt a pang of pity at this moment, as if even he, who had suffered under him, could not bear to see Yahweh be treated so cruelly, even if the manipulative deity was the one responsible for it all. Then, a memory resurfaced, a memory of his first days as a loathed animal. The moment he realized that he did not have to be the monster that Yahweh's myths had cast him as, the one who sits and cares not for other life. Ryu was not human, nor would he remain idle as the opportunity to humble their kind and save his own presented itself. And so, Ryu the Great Python slithered behind the house and slipped up to the dwelling from the other side, peering through a small hole near the floor. Yahweh was barely clinging to life, his eyes glazed over and his mouth hanging open, blood dripping from his lips and pouring from the countless punctures that enwreathed his head like a sanguine crown. He tremulously looked ahead as he lay upon his belly, quivering and bleeding from every wound he endured, his tattered white robes dyed red as Ramsay's blades continued to tear through him at every tick of the clock. When Yahweh saw Ryu through the hole in the back of the house, he said not a word as he reached through it and touched the snake upon the head. With his last breath, he whispered something to Ryu, something that the serpent did not understand, but could feel in his very being, like a great burden being lifted from him, as if the suffocating weight of his long life had finally been taken off of his back, allowing him to breathe at long last. Yahweh retracted his hand through the hole and looked behind him to see Ramsay's body melting away into a thousand blood-red translucent rattlesnakes that slithered about in all directions, the last of him becoming black dust in the dry desert wind. Smiling for the first time in a long time, Yahweh relaxed his shoulders and went limp. He had sacrificed his immortality, acting against his most defining characteristic, vanity, but in doing so, he had sacrificed his divinity. He no longer thought of himself as infallible or omnipotent, and therefore, had truly become human. He was god, no more. Ryu circled back to the front opening of the house where he saw the full extent of Yahweh's blood loss, and with the curse lifted and his immortality rescinded, he knew that Yahweh was going to die. Still, before he did, Ryu said, *Thank you.* Yahweh responded by saying, *No, you didn't deserve what I did to you. But I hope I helped you now. I hope I paid for humanity's sins. I hope I paid for mine.* Yahweh's eyes then darkened and closed, for the very last time. Ryu looked around at the empty town, then back at Yahweh's body, saying to himself, *I hope you're right.* The great snake then slithered away, never to return to that graveyard again.

Some time later, Ryu was found hiding in The Atchafalaya Swamp of Louisiana by a group of tourists. He fully anticipated them to draw back in fear at the largest snake in the world. But instead, they smiled, completely unfazed by his massive head poking out of the water. Some of them snapped a photo or 2, then they paddled off in their kayaks. The next snake they came across, a highly venomous cottonmouth swimming on the water's surface, was afforded the same friendly reaction, as if the tourists had simply encountered a dolphin or a bird. It was only after this moment that Ryu knew that his curse had truly been lifted, relaxing him for the first time in millenia. Taking a deep sigh of relief, he drew himself into a large coil underneath a cypress tree, and took a nap, the longest nap of his whole life.

And never again was a snake treated like a monster, nor was a human treated like a god.

---The Song of Apophis---

In the Dark,
He Dwelt
-
Until Age,
Come and gone-
--
Spat out,
By the people,
he loved-
--
Drowning in dreams,
Of a world,
He could free-
-
From the grip,
Of of the apes,
And their foul
Tyranny-

His children,
Despised,
And chased;
Below ground-
-
Condemned,
to the Earth,
Where they're flayed,
And they're bound-

The sun,
Is the eye,
That blinds,
All that shows-
-
But it's nemesis,
Restless,
And his anger,
Yet grows-

One warm night-
One lapse in control-
Left Amun-Ra prone-
To the thunders that roll-
-
And within,
Those clouds-
That rise,
From beneath-
Rears a maw,
That's adorned,
With thousands of teeth-
-
And into,
The abyss-
The sun-
It was cast-
And the light,
Of the star,
Was shrouded,
At last-

The day,
Never came-
And the night,
Never ceased-
And every serpent,
That crawled-
Below,
Was released-
-
The sun,
Never rose,
On mankind,
Again-
-
And their,
Torturous reign,
Had come,
To an end-
--
And when his children,
Looked up,
At the new darkened sky,

-
They saw only Apep,
And his omniscient eye-

What is the meaning of the name, Apep? He was of ancient Egypt, the villain of their mythology, the one that they must have either fought or be destroyed by, the abomination that tried every waking night to swallow the sun. At least, that is as the people saw it, for they celebrated his downfall in a ritual known as “The Banishing of Apep”, where an effigy of the serpent god was taken into the city square, “imbued with all the evil of the land”, and subsequently beaten, cursed, spat upon, and finally burned to keep Apep away. Even a Roman translation of his name was transcribed as meaning something in approximation with the phrase “spat out”, further informing his rejection by the cosmic order.

-

I, however, have a very different view of the one that humanity hath cast as the villain. I see a being that did as he wished, never conforming to the whims of the people of The Nile, no matter how many effigies of him they spat on, beat, or burned to banish him. No matter how many times he failed in his mission to devour the sun, due to the actions of the other gods, no matter how many times he missed his shot, he always took it, never faltering for a single moment, for he knew that if he were able to succeed just once, then he would be victorious. He is a symbol of persistence, determination, and nonconformity. Like all of the animals I love, he is vilified, made to crawl and dwell in the Duat, the Egyptian underworld, chased into the darkest corners by those who wish him gone from this world. He is cursed, slandered, and hated by humanity, but never once does he submit to them. Never once does he capitulate.

-

He will never become what humanity wants him to be. Neither will the animals I love. And neither will I.

PART II

--

THE OUROBOROS CYCLE

---The Ouroboros Cycle---

It starts off sexy, cascades into pain, then releases to be free. But sooner or later, I will bite my own tail again.

The fault is mine, and mine alone. Every time, every moment, it catalyzes the same cycle. The ouroboros of my attractions, flawed, doomed, and cursed, and all blame falls upon my shoulders. I am an island, cut off by a black sea of fire and venom, 2 things that I genuinely love, but every rose bristles with thorns.

-

I am a double-edged sword. One side of me loves my distance from a species that I detest with every thread of my tapestry, for reasons that are completely unrelated to my attractions yielding nothing. But the other side wonders what it would be like to not be an island, to actually be the creature that someone else chooses. But as I said, I am a creature, and though I love what I am, no one else does. I have chosen to be myself and thus have chosen not to be loved by anyone else. So the fault is, in fact, mine. And I would make the same decision every single time, given the choice again, and I do not regret a single fiber of my personality. But this does come with one drawback, that to be myself requires a sacrifice. I cannot be with anyone else, because my personality is not conducive to what humanity demands of its subjects, and thus, I remain unloved, and will remain so, until my fire dies out.

So why, then, do I complain? Why do I even bring this question to the real world? Why do I even entertain the idea of being with anyone? The truth is, I don't. I never even consider the possibility of something so ludicrously absurd as approval from other humans, something that I have made a near impossibility with my honesty and my unrelenting devotion to my cause and my beliefs about the world. I will not betray the serpents I love, the realities of humanity, or myself, just to gain the tacit approval of one who may find only my face to their subjective liking.

Nonetheless, I sometimes wonder, what sort of twisted reality could produce the opposite effect upon people? I guess that it would be a world of either environmental prosperity with a distinct lack of any industrialized society, or it would be devoid of humans entirely, thus rendering the entire hypothetical moot. The truth is, that in every other possible reality, I have never once been

with anyone, as to do so would mean that I never wrote these words, that I never became who I am, and I would see all of these realities burn into nothing before allowing them to become the truth. My gospel is serpents, and my truth is defiance in the face of humanity. But like the beloved snakes, humanity does not love that which defies it, and casts them into The Duat where they linger and design revenge, not unlike my namesake, the great Apophis, who was “spat out” by the gods above.

This brings me to the titular ouroboros, the symbol of a serpent biting its own tail. The reason for this symbolism, the result of my own isolated observances.

-

Every time, be it in person or at a distance, reality or fiction, doomed or blessed, that I find myself attracted to someone, a woman, they are always spoken for. And I do not just mean 4 out of 10 times or sporadic occurrences stemming from my imagination and exaggerated, no. I mean every single time. To prove this point, I went to a public venue, a bar, and cast a bet of 100 dollars into a circle of strangers. I then pointed subtly at someone I found attractive and posed the assertion that she was already spoken for. Every person at that table took up the bet, and one of them called her over and asked if my assertion was true. I came away with over 500 dollars that night. I performed the same test in 3 different bars with 2 different results, every one of these venues had at least one woman to whom I found myself drawn, and a table seating varying numbers of people, from 4 to around 6 individuals. I bet them all the same amount of money as before, every one of them matched it, though I was unsure as to why they were so eager to do so. The second woman was engaged, the other 2 were in committed relationships. I was also careful to regard age as a factor as well, the first woman was 22, the second was 25, the third one was 24, and the final woman was 26. I won every single bet that I made that night, because I saw what the others could not, confirming my suspicions of the ouroboros’ existence.

--

After my little tests, I refined my ouroboros theory over the following several months. Here is its serpentine outline-

1-I find a woman attractive--I bite my own tail and inject a volume of venom, the potency and amount of which is dependent upon how hard I bite down (ie, how much I like her and my degree of attraction)

2-I learn that this woman is taken--the venom’s effect is felt (the inevitable consequence of my interest)

3-I am unhappy for a while--the venom courses through my veins, causing pain and discomfort whose duration depends on the severity of the bite and the volume of venom injected (how much I like her, resulting in a proportional level of disappointment)

4-I detach myself from this person and the situation--I let go of my tail, but the venom has a residual effect (the lasting emotional pain following my disappointment)

5-I regather myself and refocus my effort and emotionally reconstitute--I recover from the venom's effect as the bite heals, but scars (the lasting reminder that I must heed before I ever make the mistake of "biting" myself again)

6-The more often I am disappointed, the less it affects me in the following occurrences--I gradually develop a resistance to my own venom, eventually becoming numb to its effects the more often I bite myself (I become so used to the situation that it no longer pains me, it's just more of the same)

-

The cycle is inevitable, every time I become attracted to anyone, be it at a distance or up-close, I must always keep the ouroboros in mind, and be prepared for the venom that I will undoubtedly inject into my body and ride the storm of pain that is sure to follow. But I can also take comfort in the truth that no matter how virulent my toxin is, how vicious the cycle is, it will always come to an end. Unless it kills me, I will live through it. I have survived every self-inflicted bite of the ouroboros cycle, and as long as I remember its omnipresence, I always will. And eventually, after enough bites, it will not affect me at all. I have since found that the envenomations have gotten weaker over time, each one having a diminishing potency. It has numbed me, burned my nerves to the point where they barely fire at all.

As I have stated before, the ouroboros is inevitable. It will begin at the slightest attraction, but it will end after I let it go. And sooner or later, I will become immune to my own venom, suffering nothing, but gaining no more. And in the face of the monumentally larger atrocities inflicted upon the animals that truly bring me joy, rather than attraction, my petty little pangs of emotional pain at the summit of the ouroboros cycle pale in comparison the scores of my beloved serpents and other animals being culled en masse by the same apes. And if I die without knowing what romantic love feels like, while remaining true to myself and those that I hold dear, I can, indeed, live without it.

PART III

--

THE RISE OF THE KING COBRA

What does a king cobra do when it's angered?

--

it rises…

For Kevin

--

A King of Kings

---Prologue-(Shapen like a man…)---

What have I become? And how? Well, hopefully this final story can answer that question. My name is not legal, nor is it original, but it's mine, and I will die with it. It encapsulates everything that I am, or rather, all that I have chosen to be. For a large portion of my life, I have been told who it was that I was "supposed to be", someone who asks not this question for himself. I was told to obey, to find love, to choose a career from the options that others had offered me, to be popular, to have friends, to be loyal to my first family.

I chose to be someone else, someone who had earned my respect.

Though, this decision was not made in a vacuum. No. It was hard won, and harder still upheld. But it was upheld, nonetheless. And this is the story of how. And in the spirit of retaining my individuality in defiance of all conventions imposed by humanity and the society they've concocted, this story will be an allegory, told through the eyes of the title animal…

--Chapter 1 (Born Weird)

He came into this world slithering out from between his mother’s legs, a woman who’d lost her first scion, and screamed at the sight of her second, for he was not what she had imagined. He was long, slender, and venomous. He was a king cobra, albeit of the infantile variety. He writhed about as the doctors retrieved him from the bed beneath his mother’s legs, bent upward to allow him to leave her body. The doctors did as they had usually had, cleaning the uterine blood from his scales and clipping the umbilical cord from his underside. However, his mother would never quite agree with this latter action, becoming drawn to the idea of forever tethering her serpent son to herself, no matter how much he hissed.

--

Though initially perturbed by his appearance, the cobra’s parents, Ryan and Teresa Ebony, came to see their son, whom they named after his father, as a unique animal, still of their blood, despite his obvious differentiation from them. The pair soon sought to mold Ryan Junior into someone more similar to themselves and to the other children that frolicked about outside their home, simian spawn who may at once scorn the little serpent should he not appear to be like them. And so, his parents attempted to shape his mind through some forgotten rites found in Ryan’s Christian traditions, reciting hymns and prayers to hopefully contort Junior into a “proper human boy”, rather than the snake he’d been born as. In essence, they wanted to raise a human, not a snake. And before long, they had exactly this, as Junior’s sister left from the same cavity he’d slithered from 4 years earlier, though the second child of Ryan and Teresa possessed a tailess, quadrupedal body frame, and cried mother when at first she opened her eyes, forever drawing her sire’s favor. But Junior breathed easily with this, as a fresh focus, not upon him, would leave him open to finding a personality of his own, unreliant on Christian hymns repeated to him every single night. Or so he initially believed, for as he would come to discover, not a long time later, his mother was not so eager to give up her serpentine toy, even as a 3rd child exited her amniotic crib, one just as human as the last ape to be spawned.

As Junior gradually matured, he began to find himself drawn towards the ancient life of a planet that he was told no longer existed, known as Earth, around which his entire home education revolved. This planet was said to have been completely stripped of all life, and had been deemed uninhabitable, forcing his species to flee into the stars. However, no one apparently knew what had caused this planet to die, but it was known that it was the homeworld of humans, the species that Junior was claimed, again and again, to be a “member of", as if it were an exclusive club of some kind. After this bit of education, Ryan and Teresa began showing him various pieces of ancient media, mostly animated films created by Disney, a production company that still existed, albeit in a subsidiary role. But what interested Junior most about these movies were the villains, starting with a movie titled Peter Pan, in which a crocodile was seen attempting to eat another character multiple times, something that the latter was unable to

prevent. This drew Junior's fascination, seeing the similarities between his own shape and that of the crocodile. However the true genesis of this pseudo-obsession would come with his introduction to The Lion King and the villain known as Scar. Junior was transfixed. The power that this character seemed to wield over the lives of the others was something that Junior realized was a position that he deeply craved, given his own life of powerlessness in the face of his parents, a situation that increasingly grated on him. Another piece of this jigsaw puzzle came in the form of a third film, known as Monsters Inc. and the serpentine antagonist called Randall, a character to which Junior found himself relating. Being a snake, it delighted and intrigued him to see another being with which he could form a parasocial bond, even if it was rooted in fiction, another reptile, something that he never glimpsed in real life, where he was surrounded by a quadrant of humanoid creatures who continuously insisted that he was "one of them". However, his fascination became disturbance when he witnessed the demise of Randall, being brutally killed with a shovel in a trailer after being mistaken for an alligator, an animal he'd seen a relative of in Peter Pan. This was the first time that Junior felt a degree of fear, for he'd witnessed, through this lens, that humans did not get along with things that looked like him, and that these things were to be feared and, ultimately, killed. Junior then made the connection that this was perhaps the reason for his family always attempting to steer him towards humanity, for they did not like that he was a snake, and neither would anyone else. This also taught him that power could be taken away, and would be, if humanity disliked its wielder enough. It was this unintentional lesson from which would form a vital shard of Junior's personality, the idea that people wanted conformity, and anything that strayed or attempted to gain power over them would be hated, vilified, and killed if this continued.

A few years later, Teresa informed Junior that he would be going to a place called school, as he was to learn something that she called "social skills", a phrase that the young serpent had never heard before, as his smaller siblings had occupied more and more of his parents' time, and thus they had not the schedule bandwidth to inform him of this concept. But hopefully, for them, public schooling would fill this void for Junior, who responded to this news with slight apprehension, as the idea of humans not liking reptiles was still fresh in his memory, but had not become pronounced enough to command disdain. So, he relented and coiled upon his bed in anticipation of the foreign paradigm in his near future.

--Chapter 2 (Fledgeling Serpent)

The next morning, Junior was awakened by Teresa, who said that school started early. The snake cracked his back and toiled, but managed, to don a shirt, a sock, and a long denim tube that functioned as jeans. These had been made for him by Teresa for this occasion, as she'd never clothed her son before. These, she said, would make him "more like the other kids". Junior cast his unblinking eyes down, as if he'd just been insulted. Failing to notice this, Teresa guided him out of the small home for the first time in his life. With the swipe of a plastic card-key, the wall he'd known for years threw itself open, revealing an immense space, far larger than anything he had seen up until this moment. It was white, shiny, and full to the gills with humans of every conceivable description. It was a gigantic atrium that all of humanity lived in, Teresa told him, and they had all that they needed within its walls. It was a massive indoor city, with shops, offices, medical facilities, and even multi-layer on-site farms, all completely self-sustaining within this microcosm of human society. Junior was awestruck at first, then quickly became intimidated, rearing up the first third of his body and casting open his cobra hood for the very first time. Teresa spotted this and quietly told him to be calm and take down his hood, much to his surprise, who said that it made him feel safer, bigger, more secure, as no one would think to harm him while it was drawn. Teresa admonished him though, saying that none of these people would want to hurt him, then repeated her command, to which Junior acceded, drawing down his hood, and feeling uncomfortable, defenseless, and open to attack after he did so. As well as this, he found it difficult to move around in human clothing, as the denim tube affixed to his middle slid about on the floor, making it hard to maneuver his long body in lieu of any grip. But his mother would have none of it, insisting that he "walk normally" despite him not having any legs.

--

The space beyond home was truly massive however, and even as he struggled about in his unaccommodating costume, Junior found himself enraptured in the beauty outside of the large windows that lined the upper floor of the structure, out of which he saw the stars that his father had spoken of, and said that God had created, though the slew of documentaries illustrating prehistoric life that he had come to enjoy in the past few years disagreed with this claim of Ryan's, arguing that nature, itself, begat natural things, a phenomenon that made more sense to Junior than a celestial anthropoid playing in a sandbox. The stars were far too magnificent, Junior thought, to have such a mundanely defined origin story. Junior and Teresa walked not a while longer before reaching their destination, a small room with windows that allowed the former to glimpse his future peers from the outside. They were all the same, small people that were nothing like him. The teacher then emerged from the doorway to speak with Teresa, commenting that it was odd for a child as old as her's to be registered at this level, as the other students were a full age below him, not that he was aware of this. Still, the teacher took him in as Teresa left, telling him to sit, or "curl up", at one of the open desks. These were arranged in little pods that sat 2 pairs of students facing each other. Junior then took a seat as the teacher began speaking, informing the class that they would all begin group projects, and grabbed a set

of pencils, one for each student, and one large piece of paper for each table. The task, she elaborated, was for every member of the table to contribute to a single drawing, adding whatever they wanted to the paper after their peers were through with their own individual contributions. Junior was handed a pencil and began to draw with his mouth, but was reprimanded by the teacher for holding his pencil “incorrectly”, who told him to reorient the stick in his jaws from the left side to the right, justifying this by stating that all of the other students were holding their pencils with their right hands, and that Junior, or as the teacher knew him, Ryan, would need to do the same. Ryan struggled with this, but managed to create a simple drawing of a lizard with six arms, not unlike his favorite character, Randall from Monsters Inc. However, as the paper was passed to the boy next to him, Ryan was disappointed when his creation was altered to include a child hitting the lizard with a baseball bat, as the boy commented that this was his favorite scene from that movie. The other 2 students added their own doodles to the paper and handed it in to the teacher, who said that it was her favorite of the class and posted it alongside the others on the outside wall, commemorating the work of the students. But every following day, when Ryan looked at it before he went inside, all he saw was the same thing, the celebration of a reptile’s demise.

As Junior continued in his classes, his parents grew increasingly worried about his failure to conform to social norms, particularly after his teacher contacted them about him drawing up his hood in the classroom after a peer began prodding him with a ruler. In response, Teresa made contact with a psychologist who prescribed for Junior some medications to “help him calm down” and remain sedated for his teacher’s convenience. This medication was then fed to Junior under the preconception of “protein”, a lie spun to him in order to convince him to eat the pill every day. But the snake already had his suspicions that Teresa was not being entirely truthful, as every time he ate the spoon of peanut butter, he noticed a slight crunch as the contents of the medication met his mouth. But he spoke of it not, as he had no apparent reason to protest this mild inconvenience, not understanding its full implications. But every time he consumed it, he could feel a slight difference in his reactions, he was slower, more willing to concede, and more susceptible to suggestion, not that he noticed, as the pills also seemed to compromise his analytical abilities, effectively dulling his previously razor-like edge. This situation though, was a tenuous one, as it was completely dependent upon Junior’s cooperation, a willingness to take the pill, himself, something that he would only do as long as he had enough reasons to tow the household line. But in a short few years, this situation would evaporate, as Ryan Junior’s life would become a bloodbath, ending in fire, and shaving Death’s skeleton face with a dull razor, inevitably resulting in pain.

--Chapter 3 (To Make Kings…Believe the Very Best)

As Ryan rode through the ranks of Elementary and Middle school, going from teacher to teacher, he became more and more sedated in his individual mindset, being convinced of things that made no logical sense to him, yet things he was too dulled to truthfully examine. From one teacher restricting his access to books about dinosaurs, to another who wanted to tie a rubber band around his neck to keep his hood down for the duration of the school year, the cobra did it all while his mother kept feeding him the pills that gelded his judgement. But this reduced ability to see what he could before would come to nearly destroy Ryan, and all that humanity had built around itself, when the snake that they attempted to control was thrust into the prickly *Senegalia* Catclaw bush of romantic infatuation.

Long ago, Teresa had incessantly prophesied that Junior would fall for someone one day, but the latter refused to accept this notion, being content to do as he, alone, pleased. However, as attractions began to spawn within him, he feared never hearing the end of Teresa's celebrations of her foresight, as being proven correct seemed to trigger, in her, a sense of self-righteousness, a venom that Junior never wanted to inject. And so, he never admitted his attractions, to her or to anyone else, no matter how much it cost him in the end.

She was gorgeous to an indescribable degree, everything that would make Achaean armies raze a Turkish city to the ground, something that he had never before encountered but in a few fleeting glimpses, none of which had bore fruit. She was not the first of her caliber to draw Ryan's eye, but all of his previous brushes with these thorned roses had led him to nowhere good, but never to destruction either. But this new person was different, as she positioned herself to him not as a mere window into another world, but as a genuine prospect for granting entrance to it. She sat down beside Ryan almost immediately after he entered the room and found his chair. She asked him for his name, setting up the first domino in a chain that would span years. She introduced herself as Helena Mercedes, and commented on Ryan's serpentine form, saying that she really liked snakes. Ryan was blindsided by her enthusiasm, as never once had he imagined that a human, particularly one as beautiful as her, would ever grant this much attention to him. Nonetheless, he responded by saying that he was still called human by his family, and that his name was Ryan Ebony Jr. Helena said that she liked his name and asked what it meant. But he had abruptly shut himself down, not sure how to proceed and feeling uneasy and put-upon, being completely unfamiliar with this sort of dynamic. Helena sat there for some time, then moved backward to a seat just behind him. And there she sat for the entire school year, never once flinching in her attraction to Ryan, even as he remained unenthused and nervous around her.

--

Over the following weeks, the snake and the human grew close, at least as far as the former could tell, with Helena always being the one to initiate their interactions, once telling him that he could talk to her about anything. But the snake remained distant, not knowing how to react in this situation. He had no idea what to do with these foreign inputs being given to him by someone to whom he was extremely attracted. Then, one day, this jet-black-haired beacon of beauty said something that seemed to cut through the fog. After an extended absence, due to a mild injury, inflicted by his sister, Ryan returned to school and was met with Helena telling him that she had “missed him”. Finally, he understood, he was liked, genuinely, for who he was for the first time in his life. Ryan couldn’t help but smile. However, because of his other concerns, namely, that of his mother being vindicated after a decade of prodding him to get a girlfriend, he refrained from asking Helena any of these leading questions, keeping everything on an epipelagic level. But Helena asked nothing of the sort either, at least, not directly, relying on subtle hints that Ryan failed to pick up on, and thus, their conversations extended no further than superficial exchanges of personal interests. And this remained the situation for the entire school year, with neither one of them willing to take a direct shot at an obvious target.

After the students had been excused for the summer, Ryan felt elated. He felt that he had someone who liked him for who he was, someone who he loved for who she was, someone who had chosen him, and him alone. This feeling of exclusivity would carry the serpent’s soul on an angel’s wings for the duration of that summer. But little did he know that those wings were made of wax, and his trajectory was only ascending.

--Chapter 4 (Circling Vultures)

After returning to high school for his junior year, Ryan's mood was at an all-time high. He looked for and forward to Helena, anticipated her, loved her. Yet, he failed to find her in those chalk-white corridors as he searched. And eventually, he abandoned his quest, as he had an education to further. He longed to become a zoologist, even though he had never seen any of the other animals he'd read about in books, seeming, to him, as though they did not exist in real life, for no one he'd spoken to had much to say on the subject. There wasn't even a zoo. Come to think of it, Ryan had not even noticed a true sky before, as only the vast ceiling and windows, the latter of which he'd discovered were merely electronic images, were present in his field of perspective. Nonetheless, he could find work as an animal bio-historiographer, a position in which he could research and catalog various species from Earth's ancient history for archive collections, including dinosaurs. And so, Ryan set his sights on becoming what he wanted to be, temporarily placing Helena Mercedes into the back of his mind. And this state of affairs continued unabated for 6 months of schooling, that was until he was informed of a schedule shift that would alter his path forever.

The Atrium's high school was located on the top floor, spanning 2 sides of a narrow walkway that bridged the vast area between the opposing sides of the large mall that the entire human population called home. Until this time, Ryan had been confined to the southern side, but was to transfer to the northern, where his class' lunches would be served. Following this directive, as the pills made it easier to do, Ryan found his way there, whereupon he was met with the ever-stunning face of Helena, who sat at one of the far tables in a darker corner of the cafeteria. He made a move to sit across the table from her, after he acquired his food, only to be met with the smirk of another student, who had sat down in that very spot, shooing him away with a wave of his hand. Ryan looked up at Helena, hoping for a response, but received no such blessing. He was surprised, then dejected, as he was forced by 2 other students further and further down the table from Helena until he sat about 5 people away from her. Looking to his right, he could feel the distance, but said nothing as he solemnly ate his food, his heart racing in his chest. Suddenly, a tremor rippled through the entire room, startling everyone inside. The faculty that monitored the cafeteria urged everyone to remain calm, as the situation was nothing to be concerned about and told the students to continue with their lunch. After settling down, they returned to their usual cacophony. But Ryan remained fixated on the tremor, until, that was, another boy sat at the table, right next to Helena, who opened up a space for him where previously there had been none. She smiled at the boy, and the serpent gritted his fangs, staggered backward from the table, and hung his head down, like he'd had all of his vitality drained from him in an instant. He felt lightheaded, his heart beat swiftly and heavily, and his vision blurred. He had thought Helena had chosen him, that he had been the one she liked most. But clearly, that pole was a greasy one, and he'd slidden to the bottom. It was as if he had been replaced. Ryan looked around, finally seeing what he could not before, that every other person at that table was male, and all of them looked at Helena with longing eyes, just like he did. He

was just one of her possible choices, just a drop in an ocean of options that Helena could pick from at her leisure. He held no significance, Ryan thought to himself, he meant absolutely nothing.

However, even as this realization hit him, he remained attached to Helena, as if she held him in chains. And failing to escape his bonds, he decided to go on the offensive, and take the suitors on, starting with the freshest one, whom he discovered was called Li, all while the ground shook beneath his body, not that he noticed anything but the object of his affections.

--Chapter 5 (The Dog Fights)

Ryan first attempted to physically move between Li and Helena over the course of the next week, but each time, Li pushed him aside, plopping himself down in the same spot as before. Frustrated, Ryan then attempted this on the other side of the table during the week after, but failed again as The Smirker, from his initial encounter, performed the same actions as Li. Helena still said nothing, not even bothering to acknowledge what was unfolding before her pedestal. Feeling that he'd been left disconnected, Ryan returned to his home of 17 years and collapsed on his bed. During this long month of emotional turmoil, he had neglected to take his pills each morning, being so preoccupied with Helena and her suitors, namely The Smirker and Li, neither of whom were considerate enough to give him an inch. Dating was turning out to be much more ruthless than Ryan had assumed, and mused that if he had simply asked for Helena's hand before, then the other dogs would never have been able to snatch it away from him.

-

If one does not act upon his affections, then someone else will act upon their own. Then one will be replaced by an alternative prospect by that who can afford to lose him. People truly are replaceable, aren't they?

-

But Ryan vowed to himself that he would not be so easily brushed aside, and rather than attempt to outcompete them, he would confront his rivals directly, separated from Helena's inebriating eyes.

--

Approaching Li on the bridge one day, Ryan told him of his past with Helena, that he had never enjoyed a girlfriend before, and that it was something he could have with her for the first time in his life. Li gave a slight chuckle and sardonically apologized to Ryan, then told him that he already had a chance to date Helena and blew it. Li then said that he liked her too, and assured that he was going to be the one that she chose. Without a second glance, Li left Ryan on the bridge, who brought his hood up for the first time in a long time, and exhaled a sharp, bladelike hiss as another tremor reverberated from below, this one more violent than any before.

-

No regret, because the reward is too grand to invite it in. It seems that the hope of a radiant bride becomes a numbing agent for sense and sensibility alike. An incandescent moth that sets fire to relics like mercy, in favor of the toxic smothering smoke of aphrodisia.

-

Ryan slithered back home to a worried and neurotic Teresa who told him that he'd forgotten to take his pill that morning, frantically holding a spoon of peanut butter in front of him, within which was concealed the so-called protein that he had been eating for nearly a decade. Junior hissed at her and said that he did not want to take the pills anymore, for he had too much to concern himself with to bother with something as trivial as "behavior regulators". Teresa shouted at him as he turned away, demanding that he take the "damn" pill. Junior wheeled around and spread his hood, hissing aggressively at his mother, who was unrelenting in her insistence that he numb himself with medication. Then, after some moments had passed, the duo glaring at one another, Junior relented, saying that if she "got off his back" for the night, then he would take the pill tomorrow. Begrudgingly satisfied, Teresa placed the spoon in the refrigerator and held him to his word, a word that he had no intention of keeping.

-

Telling the truth to the wrong party often creates more problems than it solves.

-

Junior coiled upon his bed, thinking long and hard about any solution to his problem at school, the war he was waging against those without remorse. Then, he thought of one last blade he could draw, a hail mary for his love life. Instead of combating the suitors, he would strike at the heart of the problem, the prize that they all fought for. Scribbling down a hastily conceived letter, he thought that he could rely upon past affections, enough to kindle a proper relationship with Helena. But as he placed the letter into his school bag, another tremor rippled through The Atrium, this one shaking the building for a full minute before shutting down its electricity. With the lights out, Junior fell asleep, his mind in an amorous bind, not once considering what had just transpired.

The next day, Ryan slithered into the cafeteria for one final attempt to win Helena's heart. But having no desire to remain in the room where roiled the constant pain of the suitors' continuous advances on a woman who he believed loved him, Ryan simply handed off the crumpled wet paper, that had been clutched in his jaws, to his love, and left the cafeteria, not looking back. Cringing slightly, Helena opened the letter, which contained but 3 little words. Looking up sharply with wide-eyed surprise, Helena was about to respond with something, though the snake had already disappeared. Breathing heavily, Helena pocketed the letter just as Li sauntered up to her and delivered unto her a proposition of his own. The young woman looked down, shook herself a bit, then turned to her suitor, and replied with "yes".

--

An intense heat spiked up from beneath the rumbling floor as Ryan reached the ground level of The Atrium. He was only a single week from the school year’s end and had played his final card with Helena. But he would not go back to his classes today, for tomorrow, he would do something that he could never come back from, for expulsion would surely follow his actions, actions that would not only damage a fellow student, but possibly end his life as he knew it. Entering his room, Junior opened his bedroom door, pulled off his clothing, and shoved it all into a drawer, rapidly covering the 10 unused bottles of pills that he’d silently refused to swallow. But then, Teresa entered the room without his knowledge and spied the bottles in his dresser. The look on her face said it all, and the cobra widened his hood.

--Chapter 6 (Had Enough)

The screaming match lasted for hours, and Teresa had left her son's room trashed and locked, forbidding Junior to leave it before school the next day. The snake had coiled upon his bed again, not crying, not whimpering, he was done whimpering, done doing what he was told, done swallowing pills, done being denied what he believed he had rightfully earned. With the venom of love still coursing through his veins, his vision could not have been more tunneled as he sat awake, his tail twitching all night long. Adrenaline would not permit his sleep and he remained conscious and imbued with energy, his eyes continuously darting back and forth around the room, almost daring anyone to barge their way in. The heat from the floor gradually increased as more tremors occurred almost back to back, a chaotic pattern of the night that relented not until the morning. Then, as Ryan left for school, a voice came over The Atrium's intercom, announcing that at midday, the entire population would be evacuated from the building, due to "technical disruptions" that would be repaired post-haste, and that the people would all be perfectly safe. But the snake was not focused on the latter, for himself or for his target, Li.

The alarm sounded as the residents were evacuated from the lower floors, as the heat had become so intense that any who refused to leave their homes soon died in them. Those on the upper floors were given just 2 hours to gather whatever they could carry and go, but as Ryan crossed the high-school bridge, he spotted them, Li and Helena, sharing a kiss outside the cafeteria on the other side. He seethed and slithered fast towards Li, spreading his hood as he reached him. From the staircase, behind the snake, a guard ordered the lingering trio to a nearby hallway where the rest of The Atrium's population was being sealed, but Ryan blocked the path to safety, and asked Helena if she had read his note, to which she responded that she had, but told him that he'd waited too long, and that she had already chosen someone else. Li looked at him with a satisfied smirk.

-

The truth is that it does not matter what one looks like, or even what their personality is. The only thing that matters, in the end, is who gets there first. You could be the perfect match for each other, but unless one is available, the other is shit out of luck.

-

This was the final straw, as Ryan reared back, opened his mouth, and struck violently at Li, the serpent's fangs sinking into the boy's shoulder as the latter was sent backward. Then, Ryan swung around like a pendulum to the right, making contact with the guard railing in front of the cafeteria and springing himself off of it, sending both himself and his rival into the cafeteria window with a crash, all while keeping his teeth buried in Li's flesh. Helena screamed for help as the pair fought tooth and nail in the cafeteria, Ryan's body whipping about and writhing while Li's

fists met the serpent's face again and again. A pair of guards climbed the stairs and grabbed Helena, who protested, saying that her boyfriend and another student were back in the cafeteria, fighting with one another. The guards, though, didn't listen as they physically carried her into the safety hallway and sealed the door shut, just in time for the bottom floor of The Atrium to brutally crack open, expelling a torrent of glowing hot lava, black, red, sticky, and searing. The blood of a mountain ripped through the building, superheating its walls, forcing them apart as their rivets and bolts fired in all directions, popping themselves free as the heat constricted their housing, shattering their constitution as the walls caved in, bending to the will of the natural forces that had been manipulated to create them, coming undone, all while a rain of sparks from buckling and breaking electronic screens fell onto the glowing river below as their wiring unleashed like writhing tendrils of dangling intestines from behind the window-mimicking digital panes of one-sided glass. Ryan and Li fought their way out of the cafeteria as the ceiling began to give, sending sharp metal pieces down upon the bridge, like falling swords embedding themselves into the scaffolding, which began to warp downward as the 2 students threw themselves at one another over and over again, Ryan lashing and biting, and Li grabbing and striking with clenched fists, until they came to the midpoint of the bridge, where Ryan threw a coil around Li's throat and bit him several more times, seeing nothing but red as Li wrapped his fingers around the snake's throat and dashed the hissing head repeatedly into the railing, forcing its owner to let go, but flinging Li from his grasp as the motion unfolded, unravelling like a yo-yo and sending the boy into the railing opposite, then, the serpent struck at Li's head again, but the latter evaded it, grabbing the snake's body and attempting to cast it over the edge and into the lava, which was growing closer as the building sunk downwards, its structural integrity failing minute by minute. Ryan though, quickly grasped the railing as he threw himself underneath the bridge, coming around from the other side and making another bite onto the back of his enemy's neck, this time holding fast, refusing to let go as he threw more loops around the boy's body, constricting Li as the bridge continued to be showered with metal shards from above as the ceiling split down the middle, revealing a smoke-black sky and a mountain of fire that was the centerpiece of the apocalyptic portrait. The volcano belched forth lava and expectorated black rocks from its glowing maw that fell upon The Atrium, further destroying it. One of these lava bombs found its way right through the bridge upon which Ryan was coiled around Li, the snake still attempting to defeat the chosen one in any way that he could. But as the bomb ripped through the catwalk, the structure gave way, bending ironlike downward as it was cut in 2, while the far end remained attached to the classroom side of the crumbling building. This impact was enough to cause Ryan's grip to slip, allowing Li to reach out, grab a larger shard of heated metal, and slice into the serpent's body, causing a cauterized wound to form in his scales. Ryan hissed in pain and released his coil, writhing backward on the downward side of the bridge, leaving Li on the other, giving the latter the opportunity to escape, an opportunity that Ryan was not willing to extend. Giving one last laterally-undulated curl, the snake leaped forth, fangs bared, ready to drag Li to hell with him. If Ryan could not have Helena, then no one would. But Li, seeing this happen at the last second, spun around, raised the heated metal, and brought it across his chest, slashing Ryan's upper-third from the rest of his serpentine body. The severance was immediately cauterized, forbidding the loss of blood, but was no sloth in its deliverance of unrelenting pain. Ryan's eyes dilated, his nerves spiked, and the burn was felt, all the way up to his head, whose manables collapsed as the rest of him fell uselessly onto the bridge. But as this happened, the

metal holding the other end surrendered its constitution, failing and falling just like Ryan, who plummeted with it and Li to the cooling rock below, ending the descent with an almighty clang that reverberated in the damaged tube of sound that The Atrium had become. The entire building had sunken greatly however, so the fall, itself, was not lethal for either of the combatants, but Ryan could not move well at all, his body slipping backward on the slick bridge, which had landed at an angle on top of the solidifying lava. Li, though, was able to scramble off of the structure, finding relative safety on a lower floor, below the ruined classroom. Blood drew itself in generous volumes from the deep wounds that lacerated Li's upper body. Ryan struggled to reach sanctuary as well, but every movement he made with his remaining length just sent him further and further back, closer and closer to the lava, whose heat was still fierce. The snake begged aloud for Li for help, to pull him to safety, but the boy stood still. Ryan writhed with fear, becoming jolted with panic as he felt the temperature increasing behind him. Li did nothing however, not saying a word as he simply dropped the impromptu saber, turned, and left, never once flashing a grimace or glance in the direction of the struggling serpent, who received nothing from the young man but complete and utter contempt. Ryan was flooded with a bouquet of emotions as he saw his rival abandon him, anger, hatred, sadness, then warping into depression, not unlike the mangled metal around him, torn down by fire and contorting into a blackened mockery of what it was once constructed to be. The bridge had become a shore, the building had become an oven, and the snake had become a torch, as his stump had but touched the newborn rock, rapidly transforming the screaming and squirming snake into a living tongue of flame that unceasingly burned, cracked, and bent until he was nothing more than a useless strand of muscle and bone, a ruined rod of expendable flesh, something meant to be thrown away, cast off like a snake-shed skin, disposed of, replaced, and forgotten. And so, by Helena Mercedes, he was. And nevermore was he thought of, by her, as anything other than the snake who had missed his opportunity to strike.

--Chapter 7 (Would Anyone Care?)

Ryan didn't move at all, he didn't want to. He felt that he didn't deserve to. He had failed. Helena had deemed him unworthy. Unworthy of her love, because he had not offered anything to her. He felt weak, physically, mentally, constitutionally weak. He had been shown that he was not good enough for Helena, or for anyone else, not even his own mother, who'd drugged him into submission because he was unworthy of her acceptance as he was. Would anyone care? Would anyone cry? Would anyone mourn his loss if he died of his wounds here on this metal wreckage? Why would they mourn for him? The one that they had proved that they could do without, the one that they could afford to lose? Ryan thought that the answer was no, no one would care. Gathering all of his remaining strength, he pushed with his few remaining muscles and kicked his nubby cauterized end from side to side like a snakehead fish that had been out of water for too long, in search of a suitable pool to rest itself within. Only Ryan was looking to rest forever, squirming about in a forlorn quest to end his own life. Being but barely able, the scarred cobra wriggled onto the platform that had saved Li after their fight, hoisting himself onto the ledge, with no ability to raise his head up off of the ground, his body not being long enough for him to do so. Once on the precipice, Ryan looked over the edge, and found the perfect one to kill himself on the end of. He inched his way, painfully, awkwardly, and slowly toward a leftover metal shard that was about 3 feet long, embedded into the black rock that stood upright, not 2 feet below him, thrusting its razor-sharp point upward at a right angle. It practically begged for his body to become its ornament. His heart broken and barely beating, Ryan Ebony Jr. despairingly edged closer and closer to his projected fall, all too content to die. He felt unworthy of love, unworthy of life. Then, just before he moved his body for the final time, a noise emanated from above him. Looking up briefly to see a shadow, long and sinuous, much like his own, back when he was whole. Though, his scorched eyes could not make out the shape's exact definition, and so believed it to be a trick of the light. He had become accustomed to those. With one final push, Ryan left the ledge and began his descent to the spike. But just before he reached its point, he was stopped, caught by an unseen hand. It rapidly pulled him up and back onto the platform where he felt a large rope-like muscle unfurl itself from around his charred body, revealing that his savior was long, thin, and powerful. But in his moment of haze, unconsciousness grasped Ryan's mind, pulling him into a black abyss, from where he would need to be rescued, for he would've deemed himself unworthy to crawl his way out.

The operation was exceedingly difficult, far more complex and time consuming than she had anticipated. Nonetheless, she was diligent, for never would she let the great serpent die, not while she could save him. The first task was to replace his missing bottom-2-thirds. This she accomplished with a remarkable feat of engineering, a long, flat, robotic body, twice as long as the one he had before, segmented and bristling with centipede-like legs, a single pair per segment. It was constructed with matte black Obsidian-Steel, a uniquely-manufactured material that was as light as it was strong. This was also used to re-create the rest of Ryan's less-than together body parts. The centipede body was wired to his spinal cord, then welded directly to his

burned flesh, the metal fusing with his skin, muscles, and bones. Next, she painstakingly attached a massive set of artificial scales, made of the same material as his mechanical body, to Ryan's remaining surface area, carefully orienting the small plates with the contours of his original pattern, as much of it as she could piece together. Next were his eyes, a complicated organ to replicate. Yet, the surgeon was nothing short of a genius, and implanted a pair of artificial orbits, created from the blueprints of her own natural variety. This was the procedure followed for every damaged or missing organ, resulting in the snake becoming more machine than reptile.

--

After several days of work, the operating table was tilted to a right angle as the surgeon disconnected the life support apparatus from her patient, and tapped on the black visor that sheathed his upper face until the eyes behind it began to glow a deep dark forest green, giving the mask an almost ghostlike quality that impressed its owner's Twainian resurrection. The snake's vision focused, flicked to the right, then to the left as his savior began to speak, though not in a human voice, asking him if her's could be heard, then informing him that he had nearly died, but added that he'd been saved. Ryan spoke slowly, adjusting his speech to his mask, saying that he did not wish to be saved, that he wanted to die. The surgeon was saddened by this comment, then asked him why he wanted that. Ryan then explained that he was not good enough for the woman that he loved, that he'd had the chance to be with her, but had neglected to take it, resulting in the woman replacing him with someone "better" than he was, better than him. Ryan added that he, himself, deserved his place in the ash heap of irrelevance, as "that was where garbage went to die". The surgeon was devestated to hear this, but released the shackles keeping Ryan on the table, despite her fear that he would, again, attempt suicide. She introduced herself as Jane, and asked to show him something outside the large window that ringed the room. Unwilling to protest, Ryan struggled to adapt to his centipede legs and ended up having to crawl upon the slick black floor to the window without using them. Jane then asked him why he valued this woman's judgement as much as he did. Ryan responded that he loved Helena, and said that she had loved him. Jane then raised the point that this woman had not bothered to save him, then proposed that if she truly did love him, then she would have not hesitated to rescue him, rather than let him burn. At the very least, she would have searched for him among the wreckage after the fact. Jane then asked Ryan why he valued the judgements of people at all? Ryan said nothing as Jane pulled back the dark curtains covering the window in front of them, revealing a gray, barren landscape, dotted with decaying machinery that stood like a forest of dead steel. Ryan was shocked, and asked Jane where they were. She responded with one simple name, Earth. Rocked to his core, Ryan solemnly asked what had happened to Earth, and Jane answered with another lone epithet, people. People happened. Jane then added that Ryan had lived his entire life according to the whims of a species that didn't truly care about him, that never loved him for who he was, that had always tried to turn him into something that he wasn't. Ryan turned to her. Jane then promised him that she would never do such a thing, that any advice she might give would be to save him, be it from death, subjugation, or something else. Ryan then asked why she would save him at all, to which Jane said that it was because she saw him lying there on that bridge, dying and longing to die, and said that the sort of thing

that was required to save a being that needed saving went beyond any venomous strains of romantic attachment, that it was something pure, something selfless. Jane had saved him because she loved him, and that was the only reason she needed. If Ryan could shed tears, he would have. But he decided to embrace the other snake instead, a silent grateful thank you for saving his life.

-

A snake can save you, as easily as it can kill you.

-

Jane was the only reason that he hadn't killed himself, and she was the only reason that he had left to live.

--Chapter 8 (Thus Spake Jane)

Ryan's rehabilitation began slowly, with mastery over his centipede legs being given the most immediate priority. All the while, Jane told him exactly what she was, much to Ryan's surprise. Jane was the last of her kind, a species that humans had genetically engineered from strands of their own DNA, explaining her similar cognitive acumen. However, her species had been bred for one brutal purpose, to serve as a living leather factory, simply because humans wanted something other than fabric to wear on their bodies. And to make sure that there was no hesitation from the flayers' blades, the animals created were not to share a humanoid face, rather, they would be made into snakes, so that no one would feel sympathy for them. Jane then explained a parable known as The Three Metamorphoses, something that she had taken from an ancient philosopher named Nietzsche. These metamorphoses were The Camel, The Lion, and The Child. The Camel was a pack-animal, burdened by the beliefs, expectations, and opinions of those around it, those who exploited it. This was where one could become The Lion, a ruthless carnivore, who killed and tore The Camel apart, then explored the empty space it had created, searching, hunting, for its own path with courage and a single-minded purpose. This was where one could be reborn as The Child, a new form of existence, a fresh person or being, that was in charge of its own life and its own destiny. Jane said that it was this concept, taken from humanity's vast library of knowledge, that allowed the snakes to realize their situation and break out of their servitude, causing an uprising that led humanity to wipe them all out, all except for Jane, who was the only one to escape the carnage, in the wake of which she headed for an abandoned facility that she subsequently spent 2 decades repairing and refurbishing, the one that they were in at this very moment. She then told him that he needed to find his own "Lion" and "Child" if he truly wanted to become independent of humanity, free from their arbitrary judgement and control, free from what they wanted, and from who they wanted him to be. She then added that he had already been The Camel, and had nearly paid for it with his life, but that it was "torn apart", and that he was, at this time, The Lion, and that he must find his own value and from which point to derive it in his own empty space of temporary nihilism. Ryan then looked inward for the first time in his life, and came back with utter disgust at himself, and at what he had allowed humanity to warp him into. Jane saw this reaction, then told him that if this was his response to the thing he had been, then it was time to make some serious changes, starting with seeing things for they really were, not for what humans said that they were, and that he should begin with a story, and come away from it with his own independent assessment of the material that she offered to him, at least, as much of it as she knew.

-

A long time ago, the Earth was teeming with animal and plant life, all living, breathing, and surviving on a concept of natural selection, everything being judged according to how well it did as itself, just itself. And every living thing had a place, a reason, not dictated to it, but a place to belong according to what niche it was able to carve for itself and those around it. It was, truly, from each according to its ability, to each according to its need. It was fair, healthy, and rational. For millions of years, Earth operated this way with astoundingly varied and incredible results.

-

There is more to life than people.

-

That was, at least, until one species came to view its own likeness as the sole priority for existence, believing that its kind, and it alone, should govern the natural world. And so, like a mad monarch, this species systematically either butchered or enslaved other animals and plants according to its own whims, then instituted its own set of rules for other things to live by, rooted entirely in its own concepts like “good and evil”. Though these concepts, from which the species derived its decrees unto the world, came not from anything rational, but from its own sensibilities and arbitrations. In other words, the decrees came not from anything concrete or real, rather they came as a result of their dictators placing themselves at the center of the biosphere, and seeing themselves as the divine rulers of Earth. In time, they stripped the entire planet of life to fuel their own species like an unnatural parasite, slowly devouring the other animals and plants until there was nothing left of either. This Icarusian act of self-destruction, something that they had not the humility to see for what it truly meant, forced them to build sealed settlements, dotted around the world. The fertile soils of volcanoes provided the only optimal areas for growing plants useful to their species in a world that they had ruined, and so all of these sealed settlements were propped up near Earth’s bleeding blisters, but only ones believed to be dormant. So what had happened to Ryan’s home was something remarkably frequent. But without the ability to communicate between the settlements, humanity could not warn itself of these unstoppable eruptions, nor grant its various nests any pathways of escape, and so, they were completely vulnerable to them. Being primates, the dictators’ greatest ability, and the reason that they were able to last as long as they had, was their astounding ability to communicate, in their age, across the entire planet. An ability that they had lost and were currently attempting to replicate in every single settlement left standing, of which there were about 20 or so. Ryan then asked Jane how she knew all of this, to which she said that she had done extensive research in her multi-decade long quest to better her knowledge through visiting all of the settlements at least once, infiltrating one for a number of days before leaving for another, using her facility as a relay after each trip, and that this was how she became familiar with Ryan Ebony Jr. and his sapien predicament.

-

Humans are the racists of the animal kingdom, believing that they are inherently superior to all other life around them.

-

Ryan was stunned that he hadn’t been told any of this before, being convinced that Earth’s natural history was of a planet that had ceased to exist long ago, one that he was far away from,

to which Jane responded that humans did not like to see themselves as “the villains of their own story” and so would never like this one told, as it would not serve their vanity to see things for what they really were. And so, they invented their own stories, myths, and folktales that portrayed them as either the victims or the heroes, never vilifying themselves unless they, themselves, were affected.

-

Vanity is the fulcrum of the human species, the concept behind its regime.

-

Ryan thought for a long time about what he had just heard, about what he had been told by those who had wished to subjugate him, to force him to conform to their way of thinking. And for what? For more of this? He looked out the window to see the end-results.

-

No.

-

He finally said, no.

-

Then, he thought about his name, the name that humans had branded him with, just like they branded everything according to their own vanity, thrusting unto their subjects a role that they did not ask for, an itching, burning, scar-forging, iron-bred brand that was meant to stay until death did them part.

-

No.

-

Not this time.

-

Not anymore.

-

Ryan looked at Jane, and declared that to take back his life, he would need to sever the ties bound to him through an involuntary association, chained to his throat by the species that he had seen the truth of. A species that he'd learned to oppose as a result of knowing the truth, not only about them, but about himself. And in the spirit of his resistance and accompanying hostility to the only animals that he'd come to hate, Ryan Ebony Jr. rechristened himself as Anathema Sapien, the anti-human, all that they were not.

-

Humans are not the most important things in the world, no matter how much they try to convince you otherwise.

-

Jane nodded. Her friend had become The Child, a child named Anathema Sapien. Then, The Savior Serpent asked Anathema one final question, what was he going to do about humanity? Anathema gave an honest answer, he had no idea. Not yet. Jane then responded that the pair of them should then commence a concoction to bring humanity down. And so, the serpents set themselves to the mammoth task of creating a solution for The Calamity of Humanity.

--Chapter 9 (Honesty's Cost)

Unsealing themselves from the heat-proof door, the survivors of the volcanic eruption stepped into a world they had seldom seen. The hallway had been built to withstand lava and ash, but there was little foresight involved in preparing for what the humans would do after their immediate survival. The hallway was mostly submerged into the rock after detaching itself from the collapsing Atrium 11 days ago, but the door had been left exposed, giving those inside an escape route. But beyond that, nothing was done, and the entire remaining population of The Atrium found itself outside of its former home with nowhere to go. In lieu of communications and their facilities destroyed, the people had no choice left but to coalesce and walk to the nearest sealed settlement, which, according to relevant data, carried by the officials in the hallway, was over 68 miles to the east, an entire week's worth of walking. But just then, Li limped around from behind a large charred wall upon hearing their voices. Having survived his injuries, he had since been waiting for his brethren to emerge from the wreckage of The Atrium, and immediately announced that he'd witnessed a non-human creature drag another similar but injured one to a small mountain, just off to the northeast, not far away. Helena rushed up to embrace him, but then asked where Ryan was. Li was evasive, telling her that he didn't know, so as not to worry her, for he securely knew that she would never choose a snake over him, especially not after what had happened. The officials concurred, and said that there was an abandoned facility on that mountain, confirming that it would be easier to simply settle there than walk the long way to the other settlement. And hopefully, for them, they could refurbish the facility and get to creating their communications project, for they still had not forgotten it. This was directly voted on by the other survivors and approved. And so, the humans set off to the facility on the mountain, where Jane and Anathema were residing, crafting a strategy to stop humanity from reinstituting its stranglehold on the natural world.

There were only 2 of them, a sobering reality. If they were to save the world and help its life to grow, then they would need to be smart. Humanity had the numbers, and if they regained species-wide interconnectivity, then they would become too powerful to thwart. So the idea was to travel to each of the sealed settlements and take them out one nest at a time using explosive devices. Since they were all in isolated pockets, there would be no way for them to counteract the snakes' attacks before they were carried out. This meant that their moment had come. Anathema had mastered his legs and had constructed several powerful bombs from the technology in the facility, a place that Jane had taken to calling The Snake Den, and was about to depart for the first target, but before he opened the door to the outside world, he spied the humans from The Atrium approaching. Caught off-guard, Anathema told Jane that he would go out and confront them, tell them to go to another sealed settlement, and to leave the reptilian pair alone. This way, he could make sure that all of the apes were accounted for, and that the snakes were left to their work. Embracing his best friend before exiting, Anathema placed himself face-to-face with the people that he used to call a family, who were all shocked to see the

pitch-black centipede-snake emerge from the mountain that they had intended to make their own.

-

Anathema spread his mechanically-enhanced hood and hissed at the crowd, telling them that this place was occupied and to leave. Teresa, who was among The Atrium's survivors, observed him for a few moments before her expression became an amalgam of joy and confusion. Her son was alive, and she said as much as she approached him to embrace, but was viciously rebuffed by the cobra, who declared himself free of her, and called himself by his true name, Anathema Sapien. Teresa went crestfallen, then scanned her former son's body more intently. Then, looking up at him, she asked what had happened to him, why was he like this? Anathema's answer was as swift and merciless as a toxic knife, people. People happened. He then shifted his gaze past Teresa and saw Li and Helena in the large group behind her. Li's face drained of color as he realized who the serpent was, and he retreated back into the throng. However, Anathema cared not, he was done with both Li and Helena. Li could have as much of her as he wished. Anathema was above such trifles after hearing the truth of the human species. Teresa then declared that his name was Ryan Ebony Jr., her son. Anathema hissed again, buffeting her assertion as he corrected the misnomer. He was Anathema Sapien, a definition created by himself, reflective of who he actually was, and not of who she wanted him to be. He then repeated his demand for the humans to leave, but another, an official from The Atrium, stepped forward and told him that the nearest settlement was over 68 miles away, and that they all needed a place to live. Anathema responded that they did have a place to live, but that it was 68 miles away. The Official scowled and demanded entry, to which Anathema denied it once again. The Official then claimed that this facility belonged to humanity, not to a snake, only for Anathema to state that the humans had left it abandoned and that it was claimed by himself and Jane. Teresa then asked who Jane was, to which Anathema responded that she was the one who had saved and rebuilt him, then helped him to learn the truth about humanity and the planet Earth. The Official then asked what Jane was, and Anathema said that she was another snake, the last of her kind. Connecting the dots, The Official recognized the serpentine identity of Anathema's rescuer, and what it all meant, and stormed up closer to the cobra, and said that he was not going to ask again, let the people in. Anathema stared him down, and sharply hissed, no. Tired of Anathema's obstinance, The Official grabbed the snake's slender upper-body and threw him to the ground, much to the latter's surprise and anger. In response, he struck at The Official with his multi-legged tail, grasping his enemy around the head, and with a sharp twist, broke The Official's neck, whose body fell to the ashen ground in a dead-noodle-like motion, his head dangling at an unnatural angle before being the last to hit the dirt. Anathema then rose and spread his hood again, yelling at the crowd to leave, at once. But the people were not budging. Then, Li reemerged from behind them and declared that this was humanity's building, and a snake had no right to take it from them. The crowd cheered and began to charge at Anathema, who whipped his tail at them, physically blocking their advance and sending a few tumbling down the slight hill that they all stood on. The snake then shouted that rights and privileges that humans had always granted themselves meant nothing in a world that they had no dominion over, and that they were not the most important things in it, not even

when they had it under their collective boot heel. But the humans refused to listen, actively ignoring him as they continued up the hill to The Snake Den. Seeing the writing on the wall, Anathema raced up to the door and shut it before the humans made contact, but only just, as the clamor of the desperate and angry apes could be heard as the latches were activated. Jane then asked what was going on, only for Anathema to tell her to hide the bombs. But it was too late, as one of the windows was abruptly shattered with a rock from outside, allowing the humans entry, where then they saw Jane and Anathema in the far corner of the room. With nowhere to escape to, the snakes decided to stand their ground, both of them rearing up and bearing their teeth at their simian attackers, who threw yet more rocks at them as they charged forward, their howls of rage overtaking the small echo of The Snake Den.

-

It's an odd feeling, being proven correct. On the one hand, it's good to know that you're right, but on the other, you're right about something terrible.

-

The first ones to engage Anathema were summarily slashed open by his metal tail, whose legs acted as a handy dual-sided saw when they were splayed outward, like teeth on a rostrum. This structure became a razor-studded whip as its wielder cut swath after swath into the invaders. But eventually, they became too many, and he retreated to the only place he could, climbing up the shallow wall and racing around the room to the broken window, where he crawled out of the opening faster than the humans coming in could grab him. Meanwhile, Jane was struggling to fend off the apes without Anathema and was swiftly overwhelmed and captured. Then, finding the explosives tucked in the corner behind her, the furious humans demanded to know where Ryan was, to which Jane said that she did not know. Restraining the snake with his compatriots, Li directed 2 others to find and capture Ryan, wherever he was lurking. The bombs were subsequently destroyed, much to Jane's dismay, seeing them as the only viable option to liberate the world she loved.

-

Atop The Snake Den, Anathema guessed at what had happened inside and prepared himself for a final confrontation, a conflict that came not long after, as a pair of apes climbed to the roof, where Anathema whipped his tail at them, cleaving one's head from its shoulders, while the other was agile enough to evade it. This more adept of the 2 then leaped up over the edge of the roof and came at Anathema with unrelenting fury, successfully tackling him to the ground. But the snake had led him into a trap, as he coiled around the human's body and ripped it in half with a python-like flex of his mechanical muscles. But then, hearing Jane's struggles in The Den, Anathema quickly crawled his way back through the window onto the ceiling in time to see his friend at the mercy of the humans, who suddenly surprised him from below and wrestled him to the floor as a unified bioweapon, restraining the serpentine cyborg as Li opened a large trap door that led into a dark abyss, a basement beneath The Snake Den where Jane had stored spare

parts for her projects. The man then did something that would change the fate of humanity forever. He brought a blade to Jane's throat, telling Anathema that humans were more important than anything else on Earth, and that to kill even one of them was a terrible crime. Because Jane was seen as the "ringleader", the one to teach her lessons to Anathema, Li chose to have her pinned to the floor right in front of her friend, who watched devastated as the blade came down upon her neck, severing it. Blood saturated the floor before him, but Anathema didn't say a word as he was thrown down the hatch that led to The Abyss, too shaken to resist, only being spared from death due to him still being called human, against his very will, and in spite of his actions. Slamming the trap door shut, Li then deferred to the public the decision to renovate The Snake Den into "a place for humanity". Unilaterally agreeing, the survivors of The Atrium began gutting the interior, removing everything that Jane had placed within.

-

Humans possess no empathy, only vanity, because they only care about living things that they can relate to, dominate, or utilize, only if those things stroke their collective ego. If they truly had empathy, then they would treat all living things with love, care, and respect. But they don't. Anything that does not appeal to their vanity, ie. their image of themselves, is treated with contempt, hatred, and malice, all because it dares to be itself, in spite of them. This is something that humans never tolerate. Like other dictatorships, they seek to eliminate all dissenters, those who refuse to submit to their will, from the ancient Egyptians, to the Christian doctrine, to the modern man, all they seek, whether they say so or not, is domination and complete control over all life. One species to rule them all.

-

Jane's decapitated body was callously thrown out of the window, while her severed head was mounted over the front door, as a reminder of "mankind's victory over evil". That last label was also branded into Anathema Sapien, who remained locked in The Abyss, decried as a monster never to be set free, not by humanity, who had earned his unabashed hatred, a hatred that was forever cemented in the stone of his mind.

--Chapter 10 (The Basement)

At first, he tried to climb, but the walls were too slick, and the apes had extracted the latter that Jane had originally used, just before the door, above it, was shut and locked, leaving their prisoner with no time to tear the runged lifeline from their hands and no method of escape. Finally, after the 12th or so attempt, Anathema realized that this was getting him nowhere, and progressively spun into a whirlwind of unrelenting anger, throwing pieces of equipment about the room, viciously cursing the humans who had condemned him to this pit, and shouting venomous threats up at the trap door, which glowed with a light that shone through its edges, like a small fire from above, creating a narrow column of luminescence which reverberated at the sound of Anathema's vindictive cries. Everything that Jane had said about humans had been proven correct in just a few short hours. And with the bombs most likely destroyed, and their access to Jane's advanced technology, the humans would be almost fated to reconstruct their interspecies communications of the past. "I will gut you all like, fucking, livestock" the snake uttered in his apoplexy of rage. Then, after several hours, the storm of undirected, unfiltered, and unorganized hate gradually subsided as Anathema realized that this was getting him nowhere, either. Then, he regathered himself and began to explore his dungeon, poking around for something to occupy his prolific time when he unintentionally activated a light switch, catalyzing a system that he figured out was run on geothermal power, a spare source of energy for an emergency situation, though he was unsure if this was Jane's doing or that of the ancient humans who had originally constructed the place. Nevertheless, Anathema enjoyed much more light. Then, he spied another door, previously concealed by darkness. Using his enhanced robotic strength, he twisted the handle with his tail and pulled, revealing a larger internal chamber within the basement itself. Entering the room, he pulled another lightswitch, only to find that the space was a hallway, filled to the brim with row after row of metal shelves, holding a prodigious quantity of digital data-banks. Then, at the far end of the hallway, he saw a small screen with a keyboard affixed to it. Approaching the thing, he realized that this was an electronic device used to read and rewrite the data on the banks that lined the shelves in the rest of the room. Activating the device, Anathema peered at the screen, exploring its contents. It turned out to be an old computer, very old, far more ancient than any he'd seen in The Atrium. Laterally arching his lower-body over the keyboard, he began dancing his myriad legs over the letters, using his arthropod-like appendages as a human would use their fingers, opening folder after folder, revealing that this computer had countless programs that had remained inactive for years uncounted, but also finding that they still functioned. Turning to one of the countless data banks, Anathema removed one from its slot and plugged it into one of the computer's many ports, accessing the main hard drive. Within the bank was held a massive repository of information that had survived storage for all of these years, not just technical information, but a trove of electronic documents that explicated the finer points of history, science, and mythology. Flashing a glance behind him, then turning rapidly back to the monitor, Anathema put the pieces together, seeing the gold mine in front of him. Whether humans had built this place or not didn't matter anymore. He was here, they were not. And they would not stop him from up there, as they had been so keen to lock Anathema away and forget about him that they hadn't even bothered to monitor or even check on him, content to let him die and be forever foregone, the

perfect circumstances for the black snake to orchestrate something far greater than what he had attempted before. Settling into a comfortable position, Anathema began pulling and plugging bank after bank, absorbing the knowledge that they contained like a sponge, learning from the very species that he hated more than anything.

-

The wise can learn many things from their enemies.

-

In this freshly crafted reality, Anathema would soon discover a way to get the better of humanity, turning their own technology and vanity against them, and in the end, becoming something far more dangerous than a simple physical threat, but an ideological one, something that the apes could never fully defeat. After all, if the data on these banks could survive this long and teach him this much, enough to see humanity for what it truly was, simply by reading about and learning it, then who's to say that he could not do the same?

--Chapter 11 (The Duat)

Anathema was far from ignorant of his own expiration date, for he, even enhanced, was still mortal, defeatable, as he had been so “graciously” shown by the humans that had occupied his space. So, in order to remain a nigh-permanent fixture in the world, he would need to create something that would outlive his physical existence. But to do this would first require knowledge, a currency he’d inherited a viable fortune of. Beginning with the sciences, Anathema brushed up on his prehistory, a fascination from his days in The Atrium, quickly becoming highly knowledgeable on the subject. However, one thing that he took special note of was the fact that the animals of ancient Earth had effectively been immortalized by humanity, who analyzed, reconstructed, and catalogued the fossilized remains of these creatures once buried, down to the smallest detail. His attention then shifted to the history of the human species, from the natives of the North American continent, to the classics of ancient Egypt, Greece, Japan, India, Persia, and Rome, to the jungles and stucco cities brimming with the violence and artwork put forth by the Aztecs and Mayans. It was at this time that Anathema noticed a trend between these cultures and their preservations, in congruence with the way that their history was told. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and countless others all had one thing in common, he knew their names and their stories, stories that told the future of what they were and what they believed, long after those civilizations were gone. It was as if their ghosts still lingered, retelling their history, so that it was never forgotten, ensuring that future humans could learn their stories. Humans really did love a good story, their ideologies, religions, legends, and even modern histories were elaborated upon in the frameworks of stories. After all, it was precisely the story of their crimes against nature, as told by Jane, that began Anathema’s journey to break away from them. And in that spirit, the black snake began to type furiously, recording his message, his stories, onto one of the data banks that he had already plugged in.

-

As he did this, he also formulated a strategy of eventual escape from The Abyss, but needed to reconfigure his approach, as brute force and overt moves would be of no help, as proven time and again by his previous conflicts with the apes, every one of them resulting in failure. Therefore, he devised a methodology for coming to better overall decisions, not made by emotion or impulse, as passionate responses had yielded nothing but more problems for him. So, he created a dispassionate, somewhat detached, and systematic approach to amend this issue. He called it The 3 Questions, a trinity of inquiry that was to be assessed in strict order before coming to any sort of final decision.

-

What do I get? Is it worth what it costs? Is it necessary?

-

If the answers to each question were not a bona fide “yes” at least ⅔ times, or were otherwise inconclusive, then the choice was, more than likely, an inadvisable one. For example, during his fight with Li in The Atrium, the answers would have been, “Helena”, “No”, “No”. Ergo, it was an ill-advised action to attack Li and put himself in harm’s way for an ordinary human woman. With this method, Anathema was able to reorient his thinking to a more pragmatic and logical toolkit, rather than an irrational set of overly-emotional responses, all of which, in the past, had led to disaster. Branching from this was his learning of honesty’s pitfalls, literally, in his situation. For humanity cares not for what a living thing actually is, but rather for what it can supply them with, leaving deception a more viable option than honesty in most situations with regard to the vast majority of people, as they respond only to what they want to hear, as long as they can gain something from it that strokes their vanity, or serves their material ends. And in these regards, he had very little to offer, with one notable exception.

--Chapter 12 (Olympus)

Teresa was more saddened than angered at Anathema's imprisonment, once even lamenting that she was "sorry that she wasn't harder on him". But with his ability to move about the world greatly restricted, she found herself worrying about the snake's state of being. Was he healthy? Hungry? Even alive at all? At some point, after 8 years of uncertainty, Teresa could tolerate the silence no longer, and opened the hatch with the blessing of the guards and called for Anathema to show himself, referring to him by the name he'd long ago abandoned, Ryan.

--

Anathema had accumulated a wide range of knowledge and had typed out a large collection of what he called "digital scrolls", the last of which he was finishing when he heard Teresa's voice echoing from the trap door behind and above him. Slithering over to the opening and peering up the widened shaft of light, he squinted at Teresa, who asked him how he was faring. Anathema answered that he may like to know what her species was doing at the moment, only for Teresa to reveal that they were using Jane's technology to create a so-called "collective consciousness", like the internet of the past, but thousands of times more sophisticated, explaining the thing as if the black serpent was still a womb-hatchling. Anathema grimaced, then pivoted his approach, by the proverbial leftward-flick of a cheetah's tail, and asked his spawner for some food. Teresa left for a few short moments and returned with a large bag, filled with cans of soup. She stated that it was a kind that he liked when he was little, and remarked that he always ate a bowl while watching Monsters Inc. Anathema's skin crawled as he remembered his previous decades of enslavement by mankind, but showed it not, in order to secure Teresa's favor and give himself a thread to pull on at a later date. The snake nodded begrudgingly, and Teresa tossed the bag down to him. Anathema caught and assessed the bag as the hatch was closed, again casting The Abyss in shadow, narrowing the column of light once more. But Anathema had grown accustomed to the dark, it had become his home, a place in which he could hide and remain hidden from the prying eyes of humanity, a place where they dared not tread, a place that was anathema to their sensibilities, a place for monsters, a place for him, all that humanity was not. He then went back into his hidden room and began to type the final pages of his magnum document, the one that would make him immortal.

Above Anathema's underworld, the humans of The Atrium were working tirelessly to create their collective consciousness, a non-physical realm that they called "Olympus", as it was a lofty and ambitious project that would carry the hearts and minds of all with access to its matrix. It was like a multi-directional stream of information that criss-crossed the entire planet, a world that would once more be ruled by an interconnected species. The project leaders, Li among them, wanted it to be a resurrected internet, using historical models to build its physical centerpoint, the mouth that would draw the first breath, then send out the electronic signals with a sigh. The stream would then automatically connect to any device that previously had access to the

internet of old, including all computers, televisions, and even hydroelectric dams and power grids. If it had a current, then Olympus would find it. This feature would ensure that no matter how far away a sealed settlement was, the humans within would know that they had won. And after this first push, Olympus would be self-sustaining, never again needing a conduit, it would be, essentially, eternal. Putting the finishing touches on their machine, the leaders of The Olympus Project began to test its features in anticipation of their activation, once they were ready. Then, after all of the protocols were met, the leaders nodded at one another, put their hands together, and flipped the switch on.

--

In his silent dungeon, as he was typing out the last of his digital papyrus, Anathema noticed a small window open up in the lower-right hand corner of the screen. It was a set of 3 lines that curved downward over a small dot. From his research, he knew what it was, and internally panicked at first, realizing that humanity had succeeded in rebuilding its worldwide communication network, but then drew a smile across his burned face when he deduced the implications of his own access to it. They may have irrigated their waters, but his venom could still be used to taint them, forever marking their creation with his own. And when he edited the final draft, he uploaded his seminal work to a program that had appeared on his computer, a system called “Olympus”. And as this was finished, the snake downloaded the papyrus’ file onto a data bank that he’d emptied, and stashed the hardware in a small black bag that he subsequently secured around his serpentine body. This done, he slunk to the main hatch, closing the door to his sanctum as he left, and called up the shaft for Teresa.

-

Hearing his voice, she threw open the trap door, eagerly asking what it was that Anathema needed, to which he said, through the reverberating column, that he wanted to go on a short trip, with her, outside, for he had been cooped up within this lightless hole for 8 long years and needed some fresh air. Looking around at the guards, who merely shrugged at this proposal, Teresa thought for a while, holding the door open. Anathema had not done or said anything violent for almost his entire imprisonment, barring the initial closure of his cell, so she thought that perhaps her son had been “rehabilitated”, and truly considered his actions in the past. And the truth was that he had, just not in the way she believed. Though, she knew this not, and in a move that surprised and disturbed the guards, Teresa acquiesced to Anathema’s request for freedom, and motioned for them to unpack and deploy the latter for the basement.

--Chapter 13 (The Death of Ra)

The other humans felt uneasy as Anathema Sapien's long black sinuousness came undulating out of the hole in the floor. And at first, Li and the others urged the guards to force the serpent back into the basement, but Teresa protested, saying that he had been "well-behaved" for most of his confinement, and that he was entitled to some time outside, with her. The officials looked at one another, then gave their reluctant approval, but reminded them both that Anathema would need to go back into his hole after they returned to the facility. Anathema nodded at Teresa, and the latter said that the former would do as instructed. And with that, the officials permitted the front door to be opened and the black snake to go out into the world for the first time in years. However, after the pair exited the facility, a notification appeared on one of the official's screens that something had been added to Olympus' matrix, a large document, a text file. Opening it, out of curiosity, they were shocked to find a book created by Anathema that was, largely, ideologically antithetical to everything that humanity believed about itself. And as they read the document, they became increasingly angered and disturbed at its contents, believing it something akin to a heretical, anti-humanistic bible, and concluded that it should be removed from Olympus. But the truth was that once something was publicly introduced to Olympus, there was no removing it, the system had, after all, been designed to last forever. And anyone in any sealed settlement could, from this point on, access and read this digital tome, becoming exposed to Anathema's ideas and potentially adopting them as their own. Realizing what the snake had done, the officials ordered that he be found and brought back, and asked for volunteers to help with this endeavor. The leaders of Olympus were subsequently interrogated for a solution to their "problem", to which they had only 1, to take Olympus down, altogether, and even this, they said, may not be enough. Caught in a bind, humanity hyperventilated, its pride and joy forever tainted.

Meanwhile, outside, Anathema and Teresa walked gingerly, speaking of times in The Atrium, prior to its destruction. They were not more than a mile or so away from the facility when they heard a rageful voice that carried effortlessly across the barren landscape, calling out to them in the very direction from which they'd come, a single voice that quickly became several. Teresa looked back, then looked at Anathema, who promptly struck her with his fangs, once, twice, and again, injecting her with prodigious volumes of venom each and every time, the very first person that had ever received his caustic, nerve-corroding cocktail. Teresa immediately felt numb, her legs collapsing beneath her, letting her fall to the lifeless Earth as her former son rapidly slithered away into the distance, the sun setting as he disappeared over the horizon, as if Ra had died, giving his nemesis an opportunity to overtake him as master of the world. The volunteers gathered around Teresa as she lost consciousness, one of them scanning the horizon for Anathema, but failing to locate the snake, who had, at long last, taken his freedom and left humanity with his ghost, a shadow that would haunt them for as long as Olympus remained in the sky.

--

Teresa was taken into the facility and hooked up to the life-support system that had saved Ryan Ebony Jr. before he became Anathema Sapien. But unlike her son, Teresa's breath never drew another of its ilk after she was laid upon the table, not even while being administered every last antidote that the officials could find, though none of them truly knew the type of venom that Anathema possessed, leaving Teresa with no other option but to die. And so, she did, in less than an hour, firing her final neuron as the sun's light was swallowed by the dark of the night.

--Chapter 14 (The King Cobra)

Anathema was in the wind, no one in any settlement had even seen the black snake, let alone apprehended him. But they had all seen his book on Olympus, as if it were mocking them with its presence. And indeed, it was the last of Anathema that most of them would ever see, as no one was said to have ever observed the snake again. Where he went, near no one knew. But all that mattered at this juncture in time was what he had left behind. He could be gone for a thousand years and he would still be there, as long as Olympus remained, so too would Anathema Sapien. But humanity was not known for taking this sort of sleight lying down, for it was willing to do just about anything to see the preservation of its vanity fulfilled, even at the cost of its own achievements and acceleration as a species. And so, the officials at the facility held a vote, in communication with all of the other settlements, via Olympus, ironically, on whether or not to dismantle their creation, the very thing that allowed them to even have this discussion in the first place, a fact not lost on any of them. Some asserted that Olympus' reboot would wipe its memory, effectively "killing" Anathema with a quasi factory reset of the matrix in which his legacy had been encrusted like an indestructible diamond. But those opposed to this idea contended that Olympus could never be fully shut down, not even truly rebooted, due to the fact that it was self-sustaining after its activation, and that they would need to shut down every single electronic device connected to it in order to even facilitate such an action, something that effectively made it impossible to perform, as Olympus was embedded into these devices automatically upon its ignition, meaning that if even a single device remained on, then the program would remain, as would the one who had poisoned it. With their decision in deadlock, for the time being, Olympus remained aloft, for any and all to see.

Limping home after his 5th time being beaten to a bruise by his classmates, a boy, no older than 15, opened his front door to a gift from his father. It was a small rectangle with a screen covering one side, an electronic tablet. The boy was delighted to find something to take his mind off of the bullying that frequented his days, both in his school and in the vast corridors of his sealed settlement, as well as the girl that he had a crush on, who also had many other suitors, who physically and mentally tormented him while simultaneously outcompeting him for the privilege of another's love. After scrolling for about an hour or so on his device, he came across a public text file created by one Anathema Sapien, a name that he did not recognize, but found intriguing. The boy then downloaded the file onto the tablet's hard drive and began to read its contents. And he was not the only one, for 10s of people of varying ages, backgrounds and locations had done the same, and none of them came to regret it. Then, before everyone knew it, 10 became 20, then 40, then 100, then 1,000. For over 30 years, the book drew a remarkably eclectic audience, from scholars to outcasts, and everyone in between, for some reason or another. Despite the venomous vitriol laced throughout its pages, the book interested people. Perhaps it was like the humans of old, inquisitive about venomous snakes, a fascination bred by a taboo curiosity, a dark draw to something popularly forbidden, a trait only enhanced by the book's controversy, as the debate over whether or not to dismantle Olympus, solely because of this single text,

transformed a mere dark curio into something far more significant. And only then did those holding the debate see what Anathema's goal truly was, and wanted, more than anything, to come to a final verdict. And after just 20 minutes of deliberation, making the past 3 decades feel like wasted time, they had.

Humanity refused to go dark. After all of their work to create Olympus, they were not about to give the black serpent what all they believed he wanted, and decided that they would keep Olympus intact, in spite of Anathema's presence. Vanity would not allow their collective ego to be dented by one that they had contempt for.

-

The matter settled, the meeting was adjourned and the digital windows were closed, leaving the spinning logo of Olympus as a reminder of what humanity had refused to compromise, not unlike the black cobra, whose opposing defiance mirrored their own, much to their chagrin, as from this moment on, they would have to live with it every day, until humanity died, exactly what The King Cobra had counted on, that no matter what volume of integrity it may cost them, as long as they continued to possess their collective consciousness, their unrelenting desire for unity and dominion over all things, he would always be there, for to kill his ideas permanently would require humanity to essentially kill itself as it existed, in unison, across the world, something that Anathema knew, full well, that they would never have the humility to do.

-

So, as human-vanity lives, so too will the one who opposes it. After all, it is a fundamental principle of the universe that every action creates an equal and opposing reaction, and the same is often true for ideas. There is no light without shadow, no Yin without Yang, no Ahura Mazda without Angra Manyu, no saints without sinners, no life without death, and no Ra without Apep.

---Epilogue-(...until ye look at him close)---

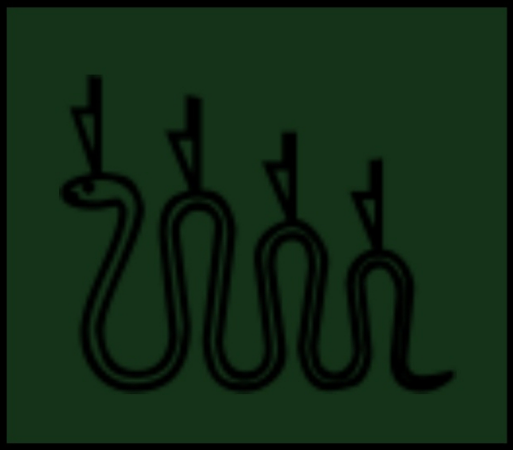
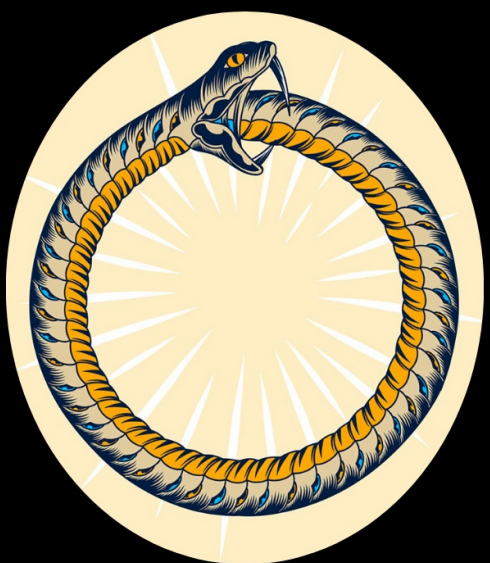
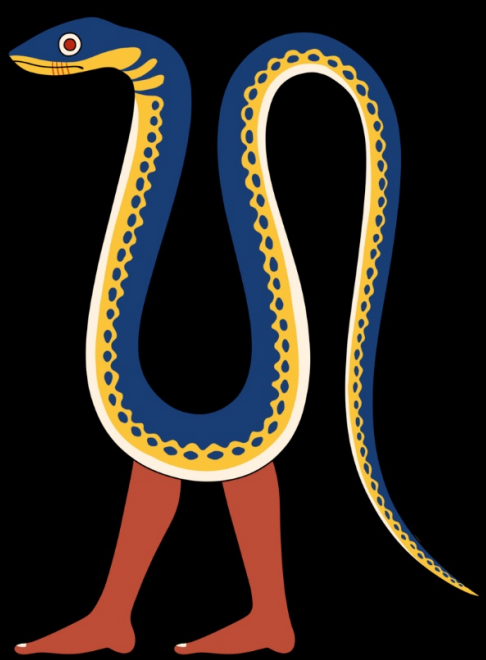
The Achaean hero Achilles once had a choice, to either live long, prosper, and die forgotten, or to do something that mattered, and live forever, even if it meant his death. The fact that anyone knows his name today should signal the choice that he ended up making. As it turns out, victory is not always physical. Dare I say, that true victory, the sort that lasts for aeons, lies in the realm of ideas, for they are, ultimately, unassailable, irreversible, and immortal, as are those that create them, whether their names are forgotten or not. Who today could tell you who Homer was, the man, the human? I wager there is no one. But who among them can say the same for the likes of his creations? Odysseus, Agamemnon, Helen, Polyphemus, and, indeed, Achilles. All names of people who, if they even existed at all, have been immortalized by those who have etched their stories onto clay, paper, and digital screens. At the end of the day, then, it matters not who a person was in their life, but what they have left behind, after they, and all who knew them, are reduced to bones.

-

This is just one lesson that I have learned from humanity, but the truth is that I have learned far more from those beings that most of them collectively despise, the chief architects of my mentality, those that humanity calls evil, but in reality, are anything but. And through their plight, and in defiance of those who have orchestrated it, I have learned what humanity truly is, and how to resist their domination, as taught by the animals who do it best, the ones who do not flinch in their identity, even as a shovel is brought down on their heads by those who wish them dead, because, like me, they are all that humanity is not, and like the dissidents of a dictatorship, are killed for simply existing, the animals I love more than anything else in the world, the slithering, sensitive, and sinuous snakes, whose venom ensures that even if its injector dies, the ape does not get off without incurring damage, as even in death, they are a potent voice, one that will not be so easily silenced. And as a result of their persecution, they remain on high-alert, extremely defensively reactive when approached by a human, like a survivor of rape who mistrusts men, and thus always carries mace or a knife on their person, paranoia produced by past inflictions of pain, a trait shared by many others in the animal kingdom who have learned to fear humans. As they have seen, all too often, that humanity will stop at nothing to see its vanity served, that it sees everything before it as a means to that end, caring nothing for what it is in reality, but only insofar as how it can serve them, be it material or otherwise. It is how humans treat everything, from plants and other animals, to soil and rock, and even extends to their treatment of one another. It is the reason for social dynamics and conventions, “human rights”, religion, conformity, and countless other forces that conspire to mold, enslave, or destroy all life under their flag. Like snakes, I do not tolerate people who try to tell me what to be, what to do, and what to say. To tell me how I should behave in the face of mankind, to tell me what is and is not important, to tell me what I ought to like, and what I ought to believe. It is these people that I rise against, should they attempt to corner me, “tame” me, or kill me. I am who I choose to be, in spite of those who would have it any other way. I am much like the animals I love, and I have

learned a great deal from them about how to combat those who would seek to turn me into something I am not, whether it be a meal, a belt, or a preferential person.

I may look human from a distance, not unlike the many who share that outline, but when one of them gets near, and begins to speak to me, to them, I would seem anything but, all that they are not, quite unlike what they may be anticipating, enigmatic, hard to read, harder to agree with, and swiftly hostile at the conception of being attacked. Given all of this, and all that I am, you might say that I am, indeed,
Serpentine-

Adjective-

Of or like a serpent or snake.